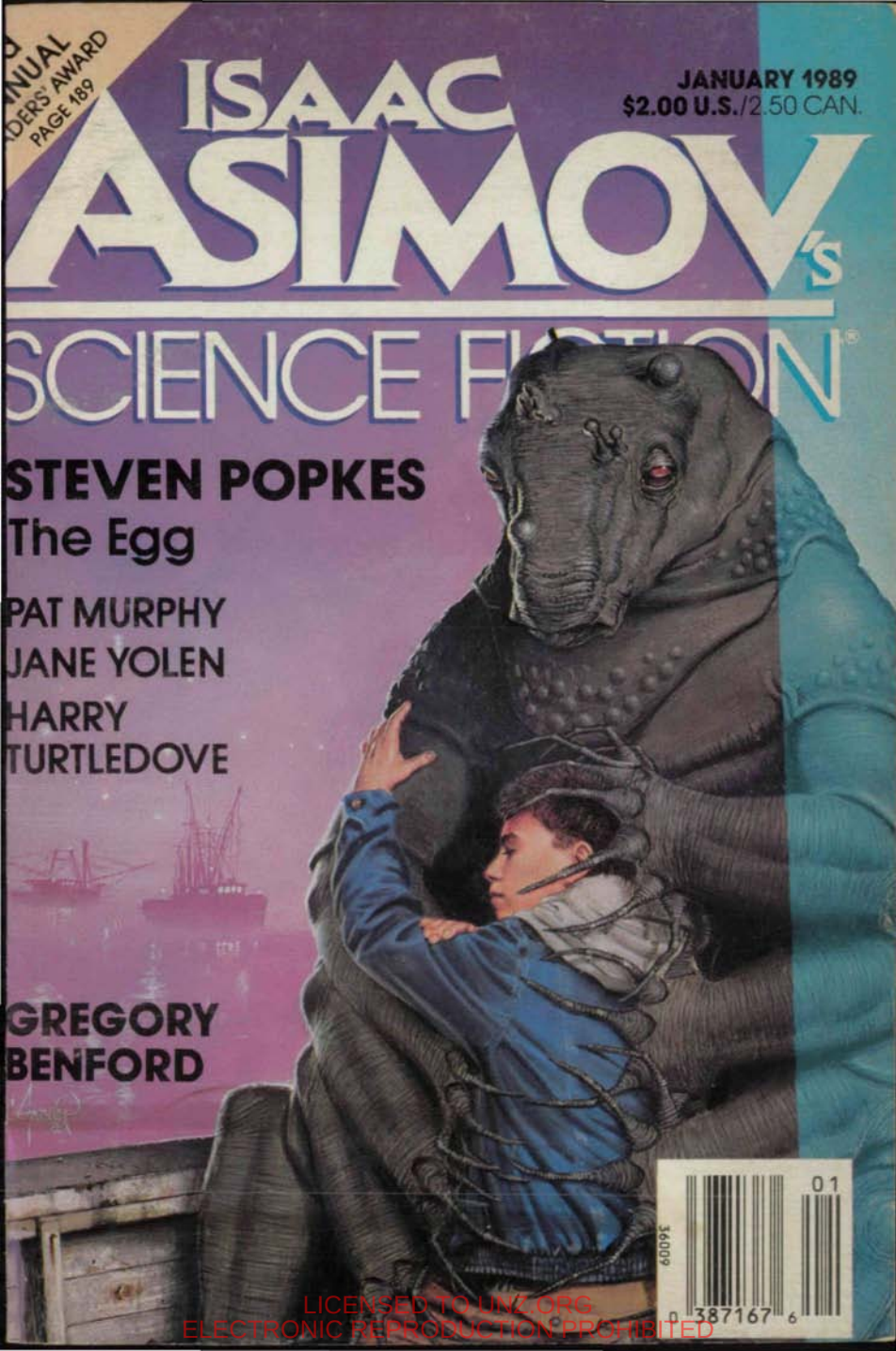


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Enemy soldiers in a world at war—
A million years from home!

THE CRYSTAL WARRIORS

William R. Forstchen and Greg Morrison

A sorceror's portal opens... and two sworn enemies are swept from the embattled air over WWII's Pacific Theater into the mystical world of Haven. Here, their latent magical talents revealed, they are made to serve as vassal warriors to the demigod, Allic. They must unite if they are to survive.

And when two 20th Century soldiers trade in their grenades and rifles for the Crystals of Haven, crystals that can harness each man's awesome killing energies, the war is on!

"SOME OF THE BEST ADVENTURE WRITING IN YEARS!"
Science Fiction Chronicle

$3.50 U.S. ($4.50 Canada)
Available in paperback from
Avon Books.
The Hearst Corporation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

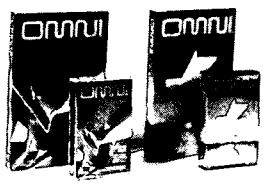
"At last. . . my stories have come to life even more vividly than I conceived them in my own mind!" —Ray Bradbury

Now, the ultimate Sci Fi experience: projected directly into *your* mind.

A mind and audio experience so powerful, you'll *explode* the barriers of movies and books.

How will *26th century* humans experience the science fiction masterpieces of their day?

Will the creative barriers of books and movies be ancient history? Will technology exist to project Sci-Fi directly into the *ultimate* projection screen. . . *the human mind?*



You don't have to wait for the 26th century to find out. Because—with the *OMNI Audio Experience*—it's possible for *you to project a movie directly* into *your* mind. . . *today.*

You'll close your eyes and blast through space at the speed of light. . . dive for cover you're caught in a heartpounding barrage of as explosions and gunfire. . . gasp for breath as you're hurtled at 1,000 miles per hour beneath the earth's surface. As vividly as if *Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke* were beaming adventures *directly from their minds to yours.*

On Volume I, you'll live two stories from Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles. . . "And the Moon Be Still as Bright" and "The Off Season." And, on Volume II, you'll travel back to earth on a mission of mercy with Arthur C. Clarke's "Rescue Party."

Each story is a 26th century *movie for the mind*—a mesmerizing audio experience you'll never forget. made possible only through revolutionary techniques that leave today's audio in the dust. . . combining *48 different audio tracks,* each attacking your mind from a different and unexpected direction.

Don't miss this opportunity to blast *your* mind into the future. To order at the *special introductory price* of $17.91 per set *(a 10% savings),* call Toll Free. . . or mail your order *today* to: OMNI Audio Experience, P. O. Box 3168, Ogden, UT 84409.

For rush delivery

Call TOLL FREE 1-800-356-1166

(Credit card orders only)

☐YES! Please rush me _____ sets of the OMNI Audio Experience, Volumes 1 and 2 at the special introductory price of $17.91* per set **(A 10% SAVINGS),** plus $3.50 total for shipping and handling. *My satisfaction is guaranteed.*

I prefer to pay as follows:

☐ I've enclosed $_____ as payment.

☐ Charge to my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Account No. _____

Expires _____

Signature _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

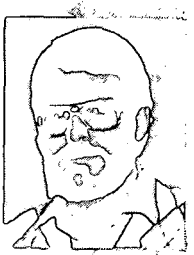
Mail this coupon or facsimile to:
OMNI Audio Experience
P. O. Box 3168, Ogden, UT 84409
*Utah residents, add .625% sales tax.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Starts with a bang and keeps getting better.

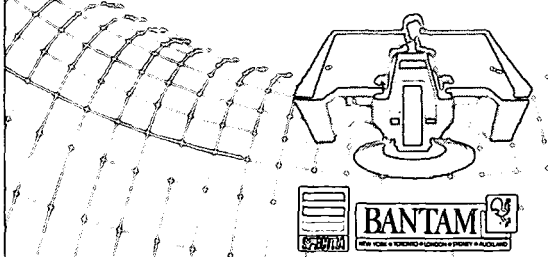
Jeffrey A. Carver handles not one but *two* hot topics and presents both vividly." —David Brin

"Carver's most ambitious book to date. Running from the micro to the macro and back again, redefining sentience, space-time, and perhaps humanity along the way, *From a Changeling Star* is rich in invention, a fast-paced puzzler." —Roger Zelazny



JEFFREY A. CARVER

FROM A CHANGELING STAR



BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

Vol. 13 No. 1 (Whole Number 139)
January 1989
Next Issue on Sale
January 10, 1989

Novella

130 The Egg — Steven Popkes

Novelettes

20 The Ring of Memory — Alexander Jablokov
90 Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man — Megan Lindholm

Short Stories

50 Curse of the Ghost's Wife — Bruce Boston
52 Prescience — Pat Murphy
58 All the Beer on Mars — Gregory Benford
76 Iridescence — Dean Whitlock
110 Real Time — Lawrence Watt-Evans
114 Departures — Harry Turtledove
125 Feast of Souls — Jane Yolen

Departments

4 Editorial: Hollywood II — Isaac Asimov
9 Letters
17 Gaming — Matthew J. Costello
171 On Books — Baird Searles
186 Index
189 Third Annual Readers' Award Ballot
192 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Poem by Robert Frazier
Cover art for "The Egg" by A.C. Farley

Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director
Gardner Dozois: Editor
Sheila Williams: Managing Editor
Joel Davis: President
William F. Battista: Publisher

Published 13 times a year by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.00 per copy ($2.50 per copy in Canada). Annual subscription of thirteen issues $25.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $30.67, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 1933, Marion, OH 43305. **If you have questions regarding your subscription call (614) 383-3141,** for back issues send $3.50 to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1988 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to IAsfm, Box 1933, Marion OH 43306. In Canada return to 871 Janette Ave., Windsor, Ontario N9C 321. ISSN 0162-2188.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL

HOLLYWOOD II

by Isaac Asimov

In the May 1979 issue of this magazine, I wrote an article entitled "Hollywood and I" dealing with some of the interrelationships of the visual media and myself. I promised to keep you up to date on matters of interest in this respect, as they developed, and since nearly ten years have passed since then, I hope you won't mind if I finally present a second installment to you. Within this past year, you see, three matters have arisen, which, by the time this editorial appears, will probably be past history so that I can safely talk about them without giving even the appearance of puffing my own material.

1. *Light Years*: A French moviemaker of considerable reputation had produced an animated fantasy entitled *Light Years*. It was about a mythical planet which was facing destruction because it had been careless about its technological advance. (Yes, I see the moral.) The company that was going to produce it in the United States showed me a portion of the film and I found it imaginative and attractive.

However, the dialogue was, of course, in French. It had been translated into English, but the English version was rather stiff and the American producers thought it could be improved, and asked if I would be willing to try my hand at making the dialogue more natural. I always find it difficult to refuse a challenge, so I agreed.

It wasn't all that easy. The animation was already made and the various characters moved their mouths in fixed order and for a fixed time. I couldn't substitute one person's speech by another, nor could I convert a long speech into a short one or vice versa. But I managed, and when the task was finished, everyone seemed happy.

At once the phone calls from reporters started coming in and I could see that the general impression was that I had written the screenplay, and that the animation merely illustrated what I had written. Despite the fact that I am generally reputed to have a giant ego, I do not like to accept credit that is not mine. I told the reporters that all I did was fiddle with the dialogue and that I had played no creative role.

This didn't seem to do any good. I kept reading little squibs here

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and there describing how Asimov, after years and years of insisting he would not write a screenplay finally had, and the thrust of reporters' questions continued to be on just why I had finally broken down and done it. All my patient explanation that I had not written a screenplay went for naught.

Finally, the film was shown and the title read: ISAAC ASIMOV PRESENTS—

As it happens, at this moment of writing, I still haven't seen the actual film with my version of the dialogue, but if you have, you now know exactly what part I played. If you think the dialogue is rotten, you may blame me. If you think the animation is imaginative and delightful (as I do) then please give all the credit to the movie-makers. I deserve none of that.

2. *Probe*: Every once in a while, some television producer asks me to write some sort of treatment out of which some program might arise (usually after I have refused to do any television scripts). Sometimes I agree, but almost invariably, even though I get paid for my trouble, nothing comes of it. (I invented Asimov's First Law of Visual Media as a result. It goes "Whatever happens, nothing happens.")

Once I got very close. I actually wrote a science fiction story intended to serve as the basis for a television script, and a television script *was* written, and everyone seemed enthusiastic, and I was even told a date had been set for production—but it came to noth-

ISAAC ASIMOV:
Editorial Director
GARDNER DOZOIS:
Editor
SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Managing Editor
ANJU KHUBCHANDANI:
Editorial Assistant
RALPH RUBINO:
Corporate Art Director
TERRI CZECZKO:
Associate Art Director
ANTHONY BARI:
Junior Designer
DENNIS DOYLE
Junior Designer
CAROLE DIXON:
Production Manager
JUDY S. BROWN:
Production Assistant
CYNTHIA MANSON:
Director Subsidiary Rights
CHRISTIAN DORBANDT:
Subsidiary Rights Manager
FLORENCE B. EICHIN:
Permissions & Contracts Manager
SONYA CASTELLUCCI:
Circulation Director Retail Marketing
BRIAN McKEON:
Circulation Planning Director
LAURA GUTH:
Circulation Director Subscriptions
LISA FEERICK:
Advertising Coordinator
IRENE BOZOKI:
Classified Advertising Manager

ADVERTISING OFFICES
NEW YORK
(212) 557-9100

WILLIAM F. BATTISTA:
Publisher

JOEL DAVIS
President

FRED EDINGER
Senior Vice President
Finance

PAULA COLLINS
Senior Vice President
Circulation

CARL BARTEE
Vice President
Manufacturing

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" on the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *IAsfm*, Davis Publications, Inc. 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing. No matter, I sold the story to this magazine. It was entitled "Lest We Remember" and it appeared in the 15 February 1982 issue. (Not a bad story, either, in my own opinion.)

The same people who had worked with "Lest We Remember" then asked me to do a treatment for a series involving a scientific detective. I wrote the treatment, describing the characters, explaining the sort of mysteries the hero might be involved in, giving a few brief examples, urging them to add humor, and explaining that they must be sure to show the hero, however bright, as not very smart when it came to social relationships and as being one-upped periodically—or he would never gain audience approval. (Who likes a know-it-all? Or, as Tennyson had Guinevere say to King Arthur, "He is all fault who has no faults at all.")

This time, by golly, something happened. Scripts were written and sent to me for comment, and the show actually came alive on the television screen. A two-hour pilot show was shown and (at the moment of writing) three one-hour episodes have appeared. The show is called "Probe" and I think it is delightful. It has an attractive hero and heroine, the action is fast, the dialogue is witty, and the situations are intriguing.

However, I do none of the writing. The plots and dialogue are written by others, chiefly by an excellent writer named Michael Wagner. Originally, the television show was to carry the notation: "Created by Isaac Asimov." However, I got a call from the Writers' Guild before the program actually appeared, to the effect that there was now a desire that it be "Created by Isaac Asimov and Michael Wagner" and that they would "arbitrate" this serious infringement of the contract.

I said, "Why arbitrate? Michael Wagner wrote the pilot and if he wants to be listed as co-creator, I have no objection at all."

"No objection," they said, in disbelief, and seemed at an utter loss for words. "Are you *sure???*"

"I'm sure," I said, and left them all bewildered.

Apparently, in Hollywood, you fight to the death over these things—which is one reason I carefully insulate myself from Hollywood.

Anyway, you now know the part I played in connection with "Probe." I don't know how long it will survive (they carefully placed it opposite the "Bill Cosby Show") and maybe it will be dead by the time this appears. But if it survives and if you like it, please give the credit to Michael Wagner, the actors, and the director. My own part, however crucial some may think it is, was small.

3. *Nightfall*: As almost any prominent science fiction writer will tell you, stories are always being "optioned" for a period of time; that is, reserved for use by some specific person while he tries to find a screenwriter, a director

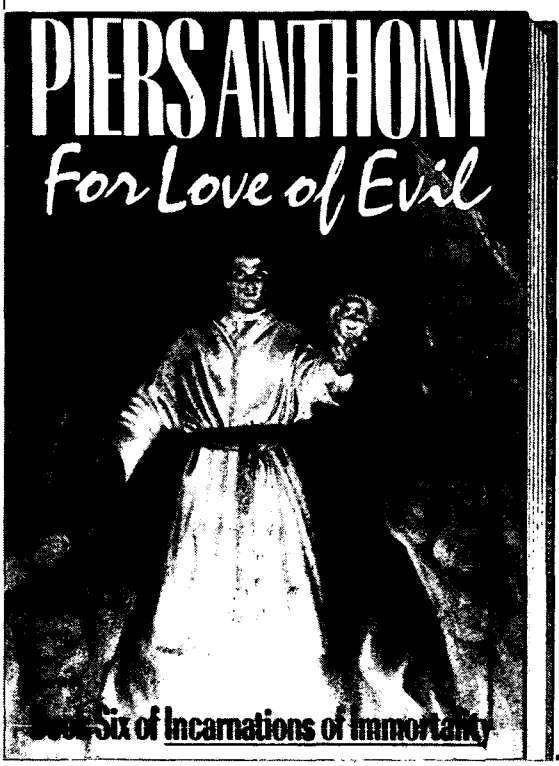
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Incarnations of Immortality series continues!

PIERS ANTHONY

Steve Zay

Book Six of the Incarnations of Immortality series features the Incarnation of Evil himself: Satan.



Once again, Piers Anthony delivers an allegorical feast, as he weaves the life of Satan into the complex tapestry of the earlier volumes—showing how Satan struck his pact with Gabriel, how he happened upon Orb, the daughter of Niobe, and matched his voice with hers.

William Morrow

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and, most of all, *money* with which to produce it. The option may be renewed but, it often happens, nothing comes of it. Still, options are paid for and the money is usually welcome.

In my case, *I, Robot* was optioned for years and years, and got to an advanced stage, as you well know if you have read Harlan Ellison's screenplay—but nothing ever came of it.

I pay little attention to the options. My publisher, Doubleday and Company, takes care of it, squeezing out as much money as the traffic will bear, and sending me my share.

But then people started telling me that my story "Nightfall" was actually being produced as a motion picture. They had read it in *Variety,* they said.

Really?—So I asked Doubleday, "Hey, are they making a picture out of 'Nightfall'?" They looked up their records and said, "Yes, they are."

Eventually, I got a phone call from the people who had actually made the film. Apparently it's a major effort; it will be presented at the Cannes festival, and will be released for general audiences before long (long before this editorial appears, I imagine).

I was pleased, in a way, for I'd never had an actual motion picture on a Hollywood level made out of any story of mine. (Yes, readers have written to say that "The Ugly Little Boy" was filmed. So it was, as was "All the Troubles of the World," and very well done, too, but they were short films for classroom use only, and not the all out, whizbang, Hollywood thing.)

But then I thought: How could they make it? As is true of all my stories, "Nightfall" is virtually all conversation and cerebral argument. No violence, no sex; in fact, no women. Since they had never shown me a script or consulted me in any way, I was in the dark.

I said, "What is the title of the movie?"

"*Nightfall,* of course," they said.

"And how will it be rated?" I asked.

"It will be rated R," they said.

I thought about the story carefully. I had written it nearly half a century ago, but I was sure there was nothing in it that could possibly warrant an R ("restricted") rating.

"Why an R?" I asked.

"Well," they explained, "There's a little nudity in it, and some strong language."

My goodness!—So if the picture is really released and you see it, just remember please that there was neither nudity nor strong language in my original story. The *story* had a G rating ("general public"), as all my stories do. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS

To the Editor,

After reading Jack McDevitt's "Sunrise" in the March '88 issue of *IAsfm,* I feel impelled to write to you folks (for the first time in over nine years). Congratulations to the author for providing such an excellent and moving story. I admire the courage of the protagonist, Kindrel Less, in dealing with her situation and sympathize with her moral dilemma (are all moral decisions difficult?). The great artwork enhanced my imagination and enjoyment of the story. I found McDevitt's characters so alive, so human that I reread his previous story "Dutchman" (February '87) just to refresh my memory.

To all those involved in the creation of this terrific magazine, my thanks for the many hours of enjoyment.

Jim Scantlebury
Islander in Exile
(temporarily)

Moral decisions are not *all difficult. I don't think I would ever find it difficult not to hit someone when he wasn't looking just because I didn't like him. However, moral decisions that are worth writing a story about* are *difficult—otherwise, where's the story?*

—Isaac Asimov

To the Good Doctor—

Just recently I started reading your magazine again, after four years' absence, and I've noticed some changes. I would like to compliment you on the presence of stories such as "Tags," which examine the psychological impact of a scientific invention. I am highly interested in the mind, and I think there is all too little SF which deals with real characters reacting emotionally as well as physically to situations caused by technological developments, rather than simply telling those actions convenient to the plot of a story.

However, this does not mean that the science in an SF story should be sacrificed for the sake of the characters. The characters are important, but they must share center stage with the science. When they don't, the story isn't an SF story at all; it's mainstream fiction with SF buzzwords, fiction with all the trappings of SF and none of the substance. Unfortunately, your magazine is tending in this direction; the January issue hit an all-time low for scientific content. Things have improved somewhat since, so I haven't completely lost hope for the "s" in *IAsfm.* Still, what happened to stories like "The Oncology of Hope," in which neither the characterization nor the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

science overwhelmed the other? I miss them.

I hope this dearth of science is but a passing editorial fancy on the part of your staff. I have no doubt that what I read will influence my writing, and if I write a story long on the psychological implications of a scientific advance, I'll be sure to send it. But in the meantime, where should I send my real science fiction?

Stephen B. Gerken
Piedmont, CA

I assure you that we don't indulge in editorial whims and fancies. However, science fiction, like everything else that is not dead, grows and changes with the times, and "hard science" is not as popular as it once was. It may come back, however. Changes do tend to oscillate.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I'm writing this in comment to your "Judgment" editorial (2/88) regarding censorship.

In your editorial, you define censorship (I paraphrase here) as when an editor rejects material based on something other than the quality of the material submitted.

Censorship can only be performed by government. No private individual or organization can suppress any publication, unless it resorts to the criminal use of physical force. The right of free speech implies the right not to listen. One person's right to free speech does not mean that others must provide him with the means to express his views. The right to free speech implies the right not to support or to finance the expression of views to which you are opposed.

The people who rejected your article about genetic counseling, with its pro-choice arguments, did not censor you. The fact that they rejected the piece because they did not want to offend their rabid anti-abortion readers only shows their timidity and stupidity. They had the right not to publish your piece, for whatever the reason, however narrow-minded or unreasonable their reason might be. But you were NOT censored. (A simple proof of this is that the material WAS published—in your editorial.)

I want to make it very clear that I vehemently oppose censorship (by government) in any form, including the tacit censorship by the Meese commission. I also support the pro-choice position, because government has no right (American government hasn't any "rights" per se, only explicit powers granted by the Constitution) to intrude into such private concerns of the citizen. I equally oppose "reverse censorship," where a private concern is compelled (by government) to give a forum to views to which it is opposed.

I'll close with a mis-quote: "You might not agree with what I say; but I'll defend to the death your right not to listen to me."

Roy J. Fehlandt
Chandler, AZ

You're being too narrow in your definition. There was once something called "The Legion of Decency" (or something like that) which was a purely private organization but which effectively censored the movies. There are also things like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The heroes of the far future are the daring captains who cross the galaxy with the rarest cargoes of a hundred worlds.

The *Star Traders* game brings you the excitement of travel and trade, as two to six players race for wealth. In the end, only one player will be named the Imperial Trader.

Skill and planning are needed to locate your stations. But the "Trader's Luck" cards make every trip a chancy one. You can lose a cargo — or gain prestige and Imperial favor!

The *Isaac Asimov Presents: Star Traders* game is available at your favorite toy, hobby or book store for $19.95.

If your local store doesn't carry *Star Traders* you can order it by mail. Add $1.55 for postage and handling. Texas residents please add $1.44 sales tax. Please allow four weeks for delivery. Our catalog is free.

STEVE JACKSON GAMES
Box 18957-J Austin, TX 78760

Star Traders is a trademark of Steve Jackson Games Incorporated. *Isaac Asimov Presents* is a trademark of Davis Publications, Inc., used under license. All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Association for the Prevention of Vice" and various self-important groups that spend their time terrorizing school boards and librarians. In fact, non-governmental censors are the greater danger because there is no easy way of fighting them.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear people at *IAsfm*,

I am in the middle of reading the April, 1988 issue, and have just finished John Barnes' *wonderful* story, "Under the Covenant Stars." I had to write to you before I could even continue with the next story. I can't remember when I've read anything that touched me so deeply. The character development is fantastic, the plot is riveting, and the parallels I see with today's American space program cast amazing resonances within me.

I have been a space buff for as long as I can remember. After my husband Paul and I were married, almost four years ago, we drove down to Florida on our honeymoon to see the maiden launch of the space shuttle *Discovery*. We got to see two aborts, and I still have not seen a successful launch in person. But I will.

My twenty-two-month-old son, Isaac (Yes, Dr. Asimov, you were part of the inspiration for his name), has a new sentence: "Isaac . . . ride . . . spaceship . . . moon." He wanted me to give him the moon the other day, and I told him he'd have to ride on a spaceship to get there, that it was too far away for me to reach for him. I believe in inculcating them young.

Dena A. M. Norton

I don't actually object to babies being named Isaac, but I worry about it. To most people, it's a vaguely humorous and odd name that other children might make fun of. Of course, I love the name and always have, and perhaps your son will, too. After all, the greatest scientist who ever lived was named Isaac and perhaps that ennobles the name sufficiently all by itself.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac, Gardy, & Sheila:

A note of congratulations on your good fortune and intelligence. Object of this praise: your publication of Charles Sheffield's "The Courts of Xanadu" (April 1988). A marvelous piece of work.

It reminded me strongly of (and I wouldn't be at all surprised if Charles were not familiar with) one of my three or four all-time favorite novels, Frederic Prokosch's 1937 Harper Prize novel, *The Seven Who Fled*.

You would have to know with what admiration, approaching awe, I consider the Prokosch, to gauge the luster of comparative praise thus visited on "The Courts of Xanadu." Let it suffice that it redounds mightily to your credit that you were offered the story for publication. It would have been an adornment to *any* fine magazine, in or out of the genre. That you got it says much for the esteem in which you are held.

As for the depth of the compliment, I can say no more than this: it was so good, I wanted it to be three thousand words longer. Make that five thousand. No, make that: I wish it had gone on and on.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If I'm lucky, perhaps one day someone will say something like that about one of my stories; because, down at the ground, it is the best thing one can say about a piece of fiction . . . that it was so fine, so involving, we never want it to be done.

Sincerely,

Harlan Ellison
Los Angeles, CA

It's good of you, Harlan, to praise another writer. Many writers I know wouldn't dream of doing so. However, if you really *want some honest words of praise from someone I can say this: I'm not sure I ever want your stories to go on and on indefinitely. They're too powerful to endure for long.* But *when you write one of your truly successful stories, they never leave. They sit in your brain, nagging at you, for the rest of your life. At least I find it so.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am a new subscriber to *IAsfm* and so far I have been quite pleased with the quality and content of this publication. And if the reader letters are any indication, I imagine I will continue to be pleased for many years to come.

As with nearly all the periodicals to which I subscribe, the "letters to the editor" is the first place I turn to with each issue. In the April 1988 issue of *IAsfm* there was a letter that typifies a disturbing attitude that I find far too often. In this letter, from Joshua Michael Conyer in response to your editorial on unification, the author punctuates his opinion with the phrase ". . . and as a genius . . ." and at the end of the letter he refers to his association with Mensa.

Forgive me for being merely "gifted," but I fail to understand what Mr. Conyer's I.Q. has to do with the validity of his opinion. Several other readers expressed opinions on this subject (both pro and con) and made their points quite eloquently without relying on the "listen to me because I am smarter than you" argument.

What disturbs me the most is this evidence that years after the I.Q. test has been proven to be a wholly inadequate and inaccurate measure of a human's intellectual growth and ability, many (primarily those that do well on such tests) still consider it a primary indicator of a person's worth.

Again, thank you for a truly superior science fiction magazine.

Stanley Colton
Federal Way, WA

I must admit I play both sides of the street. I have written essays and given talks in which I bitterly decry the utterly undue importance given to intelligence tests and I.Q. (even though I personally benefit by that nonsense). On the other hand, I don't quite have the heart to turn down the post of "International Vice President of Mensa," which I've filled for fourteen years now. We're all human, I'm afraid.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

As I read and re-read Norman Spinrad's article on the definition of "science fiction" (3/88), I slowly realized that one ingredient I had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

always taken for granted was not even mentioned in his thoughtful analysis—to wit: social responsibility.

Mr. Spinrad starts with the traditional premise that in "hard SF" (e.g., Harrison's *Eden* trilogy) the science is the main focus; whereas in "literary" work (e.g., Komatsu's *Japan Sinks*), the science, hard as it may be, is only background for characterization, social consequences, or whatever.

Using the example of Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, he then argues that "literary hard SF" is possible (even if this means the science and the literature must both be "primary") by the very appealing rationale that: Hey, if the main scientific focus gets bent a little along the way to make room for some "literary" theme that makes us smile or cry —so what? That just makes it *good* science fiction, says Norman. I'll buy that.

But if science fiction is not defined by its distinction from "literature" (which sounds terribly insulting), then it at least needs to be distinguished from fantasy. Spinrad deals with this by saying that as long as the description of the technology seems plausible enough, then even if the "science" is total nonsense, we will still swallow it as "hard SF."

This is where I think an important criterion is omitted, and SF not given its full due. I went to my first science fiction convention this year, and I did a little poll. The question was: Do you like science fiction as an escape from reality, into a cowboy ride among the galaxies, dimensions, etc.? Or do you see science fiction as a form of social comment, helping us to prepare for the future by taking a peek ahead, so to speak? The response, heavy on the escape side, surprised me.

Because I've always thought of SF writers—and readers—as a massive communal think tank, conjuring up all the possible futures we can imagine, inspiring direction for progress, and forcing the world to consider the consequences of its actions. The only other people doing that are in the Pentagon, the Kremlin, and maybe some universities—and who reads them? We are the only popular outlet intelligently examining the future, and I feel that to be a great honor and responsibility. Your recent stories by Lucius Shepard about the Central American wars show how well it can be done.

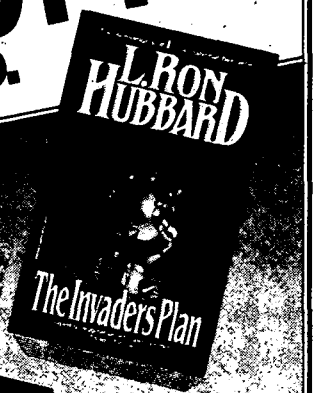
Certainly there is room for fantasy, literature, romance, pathos, and everything else, and science fiction can contain any of these. But science fiction is the *only* form that speculates about our future; shouldn't that have some place in its definition?

If SF is different from regular fiction and fantasy, it is because it must have some element of *science* about it; i.e., a reasonably possible or logical way of describing reality. And it must be our reality, because that's the only reality there is. Any other "reality" is imagination, not science.

And if SF is different from just science, it is because it must contain some element of fiction pertaining to that "primary focus" of science; a *projection* coming out of that basis of realistic scientific possibility.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ONCE IT'S GOT YOU
IT WON'T LET YOU GO.



NOW IN PAPERBACK!

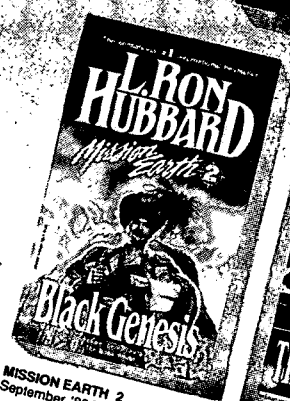
From the author of the #1 international bestseller Battlefield Earth, L. Ron Hubbard, comes the first three volumes of the Mission Earth series.

Get caught in the excitement and adventure with master story-teller, L. Ron Hubbard. Pick up your copies today!

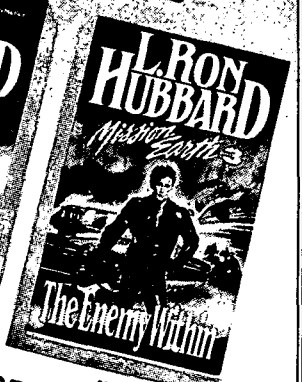
"...a big humorous tale of interstellar intrigue in the classical mold. I fully enjoyed it!"
— Roger Zelazny

"Ironic, exciting, romantic and hilarious"
— Orson Scott Card

"Wry humor abounds— but never lets you relax for very long."
— F.M. Busby



MISSION EARTH 2
September '88 Release



MISSION EARTH 3
November '88 Release

$4.95
wherever fine books are sold.

Mission Earth

GET YOUR COPY TODAY!

Copyright ©1988 Bridge Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If a story reflects any reasonably possible picture of our future, then it is (hard) science fiction; if not, then it's fantasy (or "soft" science fiction, if you want), almost by definition. I don't care how plausible the technology is, if it's nonsense as far as any reasonably possible or logical description of reality is concerned, then it's fantasy and make-believe, period. Why pretend otherwise?

Sure, we can quibble about what is "possible," or how far we can get before it is no longer a reflection of our future. *But if we in SF "get no respect" it's not just because SF is the bastard child of science and literature, but because we also talk about ourselves as space cowboys, and not as the visionary thinkers we deserve to be considered.*

The human race on earth is in its brief puberty—after a million years on earth, this is the first century when we are technologically comfortable and healthy, and the last decades before the rainforests, most species, and the biosphere are overpopulated and decimated. The world has never needed us more. If I have children, I want to read them science fiction to make them think and care, as well as enjoy. Dr. Asimov has always been active in the cause of sanity, and I urge all of us to include that as part of our definition of good science fiction.

I invite comments from all, and ask Norman and Baird, both highly admirable thinkers, to please consider this in their future analyses.
Sincerely yours,

Henry Lee Morgenstern
624 Whitehead Street
Key West, FL 33040

A good and thoughtful letter, and I certainly join Mr. Morgenstern in inviting comment. My own feeling is that it is not necessary to be too pure. A science fiction story need not be only *a discussion of possible futures; it might* also *contain humor, action, escape, etc. And not* all *stories need to be deadly serious. There is always room for some froth.*

—Isaac Asimov

March 22, 1988

Oh, no!

Not again. I tried so hard.

I was almost a year behind in my *IAsfm* reading through no fault of my own. I made a valiant new year's resolution to try to catch up and I was doing so well. Here it was March and I was actually finished with the March issue and starting the April one. And then it happened.

The mailman! And there it was, the May issue! I was devastated. My husband had the audacity to tell me to just throw it away or not read it. Who would know?

Let him cook his own dinner. I refuse to get behind again.

Someday I'm going to write a story for you. Meanwhile keep up the good work. Especially liked the editorial on the Tiptree demise. And I'll really try to keep up this time. Promise.

Trina Williams
Fountain Valley, CA

Good! Don't let anything come ahead of the magazine. Your husband probably eats too much, anyway.

—Isaac Asimov

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

I really didn't intend to write about Bullwinkle and Rocky for this column.

In fact, I even searched the past few month's columns, searching for tell-tale signs of frivolity, nonsense and satire. Imagine my dismay when I discovered that most of the past year's columns have been pretty sober, even high-minded considerations of the game designer's art. (Okay, so there *was* a review of Cinemaware's computer game, *The Three Stooges*. But we're talking about comedy of a high order here. Sort of.)

So, in order to Do-Right, I opened the box of the *Bullwinkle and Rocky Role Playing Party Game* (TSR, Inc., PO Box 756, Lake Geneva, WI) hoping it would be Badenov that I could eschew such wit for more astrophysical ponderings.

Well, jeepers, as Rocket J. Squirrel might say, it's one darn peachy game. I could imagine getting a bright group of Bullwinkle fans together, and punning and bad joking the night away . . . with the lucky survivors getting diplomas from Bullwinkle's alma mater Wossa Motta U.

But your reviewer gets ahead of himself. There may be numbers of poor souls who have not, for one reason or another, experienced the Bullwinkle and Rocky oeuvre in its entirety. A brief rundown then seems in order (guided only by my dim memories of a misspent youth in the 60s).

The Bullwinkle and Rocky show(s)—I believe it had at least two incarnations, with the moose and squirrel swapping billing—was noted for its fast, satirical humor. There were a number of segments . . . Bullwinkle and Rock's adventures, of course, as they duck the not-so-wily Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale (whose pat phrases are "Keel Moose" and, when Boris had one of his not-so-brilliant ideas, "Vonderful, dahlink.")

But there were a host of other segments.

Dudley Do-Rght, a Royal Canadian Mountie sans grey matter, was usually in the position of saving fair Nell from Snidely Whiplash (who specialized in foreclosures and small explosives). Fractured Fairytales were just that . . . our favorite stories and stereotypes twisted out of all recognition. Mr. Peabody, a dog, used

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to take his boy, Sherman, on educationally unnerving jaunts in his Way-Back Machine.

The show featured a wonderful cast of supporting players: Dudley's highly independent Horse, cross-eyed Captain Peter Peachfuzz, Inspector Fenwick, Nell's lisping, old-school father and Dudley's boss.

There. We're all up-to-date. Now back to the game.

First thing you notice is that there are a dozen hand-puppets sitting there right on top. Oh, great, you say. I wonder what you use them for? The answer is, of course, absolutely nothing. The puppets are just there. Play with them. Take one to bed. Put one on each hand and put on a show.

But don't let the useless puppets throw you. This is a well-designed game, and with the right group could be lots of fun. There are two games presented, a Narrator's game where players take a story's beginning and ending, like The Ruby Yacht of Omar Khayyam, and then take turns filling in the details. Players take five cards from a deck filled with useful plot devices, e.g., One Hour Later . . . A Keyring with 100 keys . . . 100,000 Metal Munching Moon Mice.

Of course, the idea is to use up your cards and end the story . . . the way it's supposed to end. Diplomas are handed out (Magna Cum Loud, Bachelor of Eternity, etc.) at the end of game.

Then it's time to move on to what's called "The Everybody Can Do Something Game." Here things get a tad more challenging as there are more formal rules. Every player takes a character (Rocky, Bullwinkle, Dudley, etc.) and a stand-up card listing that character's peccadilloes, powers, and patterns of speech. (And yes, you can take your puppet too!)

Each player also gets a spinner for their character which they use for iffy kinds of situations. Sometimes players simply spin the spinner to see whether something they do happens. At other times, when a character, say Boris, is trying to do something to another character, say, hand Bullwinkle a bomb with a lit fuse, you compare spins. The simple-minded chart at the back of the rule book gives the results.

Besides playing the roles of their characters, players take turns being the Narrator, signified by the WMOS microphone. The narrator asks players what their character will do, and generally keeps the story moving.

Dave Cook designed the game with, I'd guess, some fancy input from Warren Spector, the developer. (Warren worked on Steve Jackson's TOON roleplaying game . . . years before you-know-what-film.) The game comes with Official Diplomas, Story Book, A Guide to Frostbite Falls and Beyond, but best of all, it has a real, incredibly—

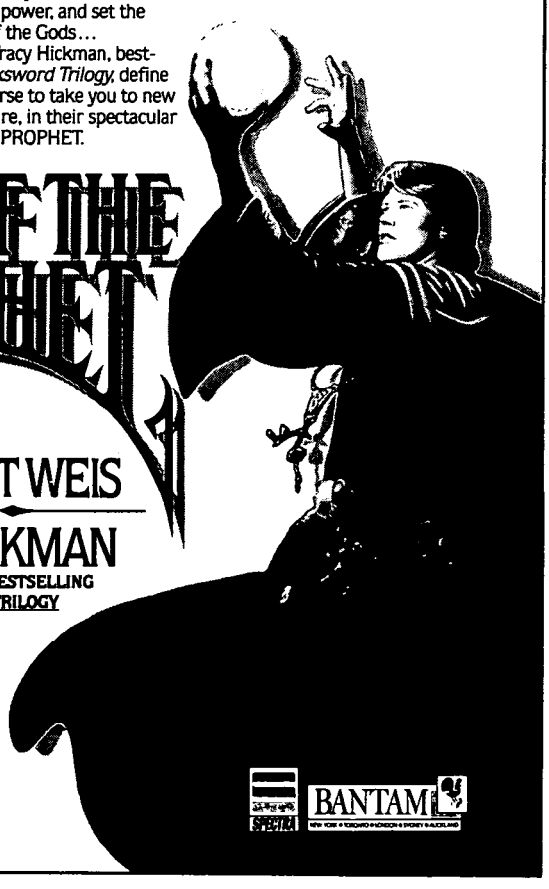
Oops . . . out of space again! Well, as Rocky used to say before the commercial, "And now here's something you'll really like!" ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The creators of the Darksword will enthrall you with an even more powerful kind of magic...

Though each of the twenty Gods possesses different abilities, they are all powerful within their own realms. At least they were, until one of them upset the balance of power, and set the stage for the Great War of the Gods...

Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, best-selling authors of the *Darksword Trilogy*, define the laws of an entire universe to take you to new heights of fantasy adventure, in their spectacular new series, ROSE OF THE PROPHET.



ROSE OF THE PROPHET

MARGARET WEIS
AND
TRACY HICKMAN

AUTHORS OF THE BESTSELLING
DARKSWORD TRILOGY

VOLUME I

THE WILL OF THE WANDERER

SPECTRA

BANTAM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

September 1349 CE

Hugh Solomon took a step on the sunlit landing stage of Time Center and felt the rocking of a ship's wooden deck underneath his feet. The mountains and bright snowfields of the Rockies had vanished, replaced by darkness. He stood, arms loose at his sides, and felt the moment of nausea he always did, and the wash of giddiness from the effects of Tempedrine, the time traveling drug. Focusing on the ship *Dagmar* of Lubeck, a tiny platform in the middle of the sea fourteen hundred years in the past, had been no simple problem, but it was much too soon to feel pleased with himself. Someone was mucking around with the past, and he had to put things to right.

The breeze was fresh. The moon gleamed on the clean cold waters of the Baltic and turned the rigging overhead to silver. Rising clouds boiled just below the moon, heralding a change in weather. Someone groaned. As if in response, the wind shifted and he smelled an overpowering odor of shit and dead men. His throat tightened. He stepped back, and his foot came down on something soft. He kicked it, and a dead rat slid out onto a moonlit patch of deck.

He turned, and stumbled right into someone, who shouted and grabbed at him. Solomon found himself pinioned by arms like bands of steel, a sailor's arms. Unable to reach his sword, he stomped down on the sailor's foot, and was rewarded with a cry of pain. It was too late. The sailor shouted warnings and alarms in Swedish, and there were answering shouts from the darkness all around.

Rough hands seized him, and someone lit a torch. The faces of the men around him were pale and sick, with fever-bright eyes. Plague. One of them turned, stumbled to the rail, and vomited black bile into the sea. He then slumped to his knees and curled up around the pain in his gut. No one moved to help him.

"Hugh!" a voice said, in a tone of quiet satisfaction. "You fell for it. You had to, of course. Sailing in the wrong direction, aren't we? So you've come to turn us around. That's the job of a Full Historian." Andrew Tarkin stepped forward. "How have you been? God," he added, startled. "You're old."

Though the two of them had been students together, Solomon was now near fifty, while Tarkin, though careworn, his ginger hair thinning, could not have been more than thirty. He stopped his pacing and stared at Solomon, hands on his hips. Solomon glared back. The past always throws up its ghosts, but time travel enabled them to take physical form. He wondered why Tarkin had chosen to resurrect himself from whatever tomb of the past he had been hiding himself in.

Solomon was a tall man, with bushy hair now going gray, with cheeks sunken beneath high cheekbones. Tarkin was young, but youth, though

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vigorous, has many disadvantages when confronted with experience. Particularly experience like Solomon's, who had been dredging the past for its secrets for almost thirty years.

"What do you want from me, Tarkin?" Solomon said, through clenched teeth. He pulled forward, testing the strength of the men who held him. They were weak, shivering uncontrollably with fever, but there were enough to hold him fast.

"Do you see him, men?" Tarkin said, raising his voice to address the crew. "This looks like a man, but it is a demon, appeared among us from Hell. He has burned the innocent with fire. We must destroy him."

Solomon heard, in memory, the crackle of the fire once again, as the boarding house burned with Louisa inside it. Questions licked up like flames, but he forced them back. He had to survive first.

The effect of the speech on the crew was the opposite of what Tarkin had intended. If the creature they had captured was a fiend from Hell itself, he could pull them all screaming to perdition. They weakened their grip, for they did not share Tarkin's hate. The light of the torches flickered in the rising wind, and Solomon could see the scurrying shapes of rats just beyond its edge. The deck rocked in the growing swell.

Tarkin stepped closer to Solomon. "We were friends once," he said softly. Looking down, Solomon could see the ring glinting gold on his finger, with bright flecks of emerald in the serpent's eyes. He'd always wondered about that damn ring. "You came here to make sure that this ship and its crew crash on the shore of Livonia and spread the Black Death, just as you once made sure that someone I loved died. To what end? To preserve your image of history? A sense of the duty of a Full Historian?"

"Please, Andy." Solomon decided to sit on his pride and ask the question. "Do you really think that I caused Louisa's death? Is that what it all comes from?" His pleading words tasted sour in his mouth. But a Full Historian would do anything to get the facts.

"You bastard!" Tarkin shouted, suddenly enraged. "We should *both* have burned there with her. For you, it's in the past and it's what happened. Remember how we argued about the immutability of Time, when we were back during our research, in Chicago? Nothing has changed. You are still in charge of maintaining that immutability. And I still believe that we can never really know what happened, even if we were there to see it." He stopped, as if expecting Solomon to involve himself in an intellectual argument on the nature of perception.

At that moment, a sudden gust of wind caused the ship to heel sharply. There was a bright flash of lightning, followed immediately by a thunderclap, and a heavy rain began to fall, accompanied by a high wind. Tarkin shouted commands to his crew, ordering them to pull in the sails,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tighten the sheets, and lash the rudder. They stumbled to obey. Several of the men holding Solomon went with them.

Solomon twisted, drove his elbow into the side of one of his remaining captors, and broke free. The men were too panicked to react. Solomon lunged for Tarkin and dragged him to the deck. Lightning flashed above them and waves crashed over the deck.

Tarkin drove the heel of his hand between Solomon's eyes and knocked him back as the wind tore off the top of the mast with a screaming crash. Rigging fell upon them from overhead. Tarkin rolled over and kicked him with a booted foot. Solomon grabbed at it, but was swept back by a heavy wave. Bitter salt water filled his nose and mouth, and he choked. He rolled down the deck and grabbed at the railing. He felt himself slipping.

There was nothing else he could do. He rolled his eyes up, recalled his conditioning, and an instant later was lying on the windswept surface of the landing stage at the Aerie of Time Center amid the snow-covered peaks of the Canadian Rockies. After the darkness of the Baltic night, the mountain sun was blinding. He got to his hands and knees and vomited up a gallon of salt water.

"Son of a bitch," he said, then fell down and lost consciousness.

January 2097 CE

The last guard post was an old pissoir with the tricolor-and-sun emblem of the Second Commune painted on it. The dim light of a brazier flickered within, though when the guards emerged to check Hugh Solomon's documents they didn't look any warmer than he was after his climb up the icy heights of Montmartre. The puff of their breaths rose to mingle with the snow that sifted out of the hollow sky and the night that drifted over Paris.

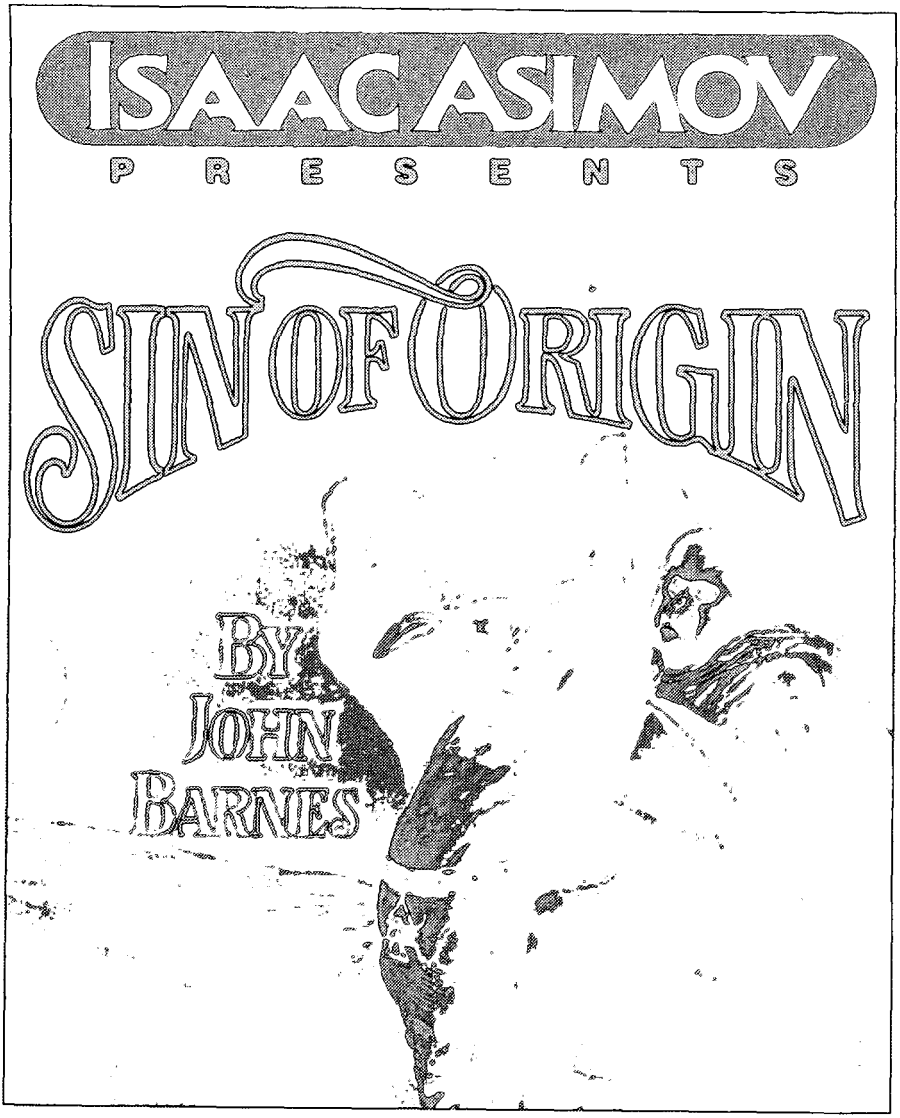
"A meeting with a congregation of rooks and sparrows?" said one of the guards, his beard and moustache glistening with frost. He grinned, revealing missing teeth. "Don't look for God. He has left that place, that is, if He ever was there." It took a peculiar sort of obstinacy to be an atheist in an age when God was so obviously dead.

"Don't be a fool," Solomon said sharply.

The man's face froze, and he stepped back, slowly and carefully. Solomon carried a laissez-passer from the Comité Central itself, or rather, a forgery indistinguishable from it, and was obviously not someone to be trifled with. The guard muttered an apology, which Solomon ignored.

The corporal of the guard, a grim, wrinkled man who looked as if he might have once been fat, checked the documents meticulously, despite the fact that Solomon had already passed two other checkpoints on the way up Montmartre. The man held on to duty, though that duty had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



"Only the very best science fiction starts arguments, and people will be arguing over this book for many years to come."

--Janet Kagan

CONGDON & WEED, INC.

New York • Chicago

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

served three different governments in the last five years, and currently consisted of guarding the approaches to an abandoned cathedral. "Pass," he said, almost reluctantly, and handed Solomon back the forged documents. So Solomon proceeded up the last slope of the hill to the ruins of the cathedral, dangling a foil-wrapped box by the string that tied it up, daintily, with one finger, as if on his way to a birthday party. The three guards watched him and wondered where the hell he was going.

The elongated, bone-white elegance of the cathedral of Sacré-Coeur bulked against the sky, like some vast, fossil crustacean left behind by ancient seas. Eighteen years before it had been shattered by the ground shock of the five megaton fusion explosion near Meaux which had also turned the indolent curves of the Marne into a vast poisonous lake. One of the side domes had been destroyed. The main dome had a crack running through it.

Solomon stopped at the top of the tilted marble steps, unwilling to push into the darkness that lay on the other side of the crazily hanging bronze doors. Below him only the occasional flare of a bonfire marked what had once been called the City of Light. The bright pinpoints did nothing against the cold on the top of the hill. He felt himself surrounded by centuries of swirling, oily mist, the smoke of carbonized flesh. This was the time of the Great Forgetting, when nuclear wars had destroyed human civilization, and time travelers were forbidden entry, for the roots of Time Center itself lay here. The world spun dizzily, and Solomon clutched at the doors to keep from falling. He choked and fought to breathe. He thought Katsuro's help had eliminated the autonomic nerve blocks but there may have been an even deeper level of conditioning.

"Come in, Hugh," a throbbing, liquid voice of uncertain sex said from within. "You'll catch your death." The voice chuckled. Solomon stepped over the shattered marble into the nave. Darkness pushed against his face like a shroud. It was warmer inside the church, and he could breathe again. "This way. Come to mama." With a hissing scratch a candle flickered at the other end of the cathedral. A plump, smooth hand, the fingers covered with glittering rings, held the match up. An invisible pair of lips blew it out.

Solomon moved slowly towards the candle, sliding his feet across the uneven, rubble-strewn floor. The dim shapes of statues, piled-up pews, and crosses danced briefly in the light, vanished, then danced again. The air smelled wet and dusty. Bile stung the back of his throat.

He'd stretched himself to the limit to get here. Acquiring extra, illicit doses of Tempedrine from manufactories in sixteenth century Germany and twentieth century California, he had pumped himself into almost a state of toxic psychosis to get over the barriers of interdict Time Center had put up around the Great Forgetting, bent Time Center's mental

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

conditioning with the aid of a Zen Buddhist monk in thirteenth century Japan, and hired a seventeenth century Dutch engraver to forge his documents. There were some things that even a Full Historian was forbidden to mess with. He only hoped that it would be worth it.

When the seated figure became clear in front of him, he stopped, just outside the circle of light cast by the candle, and took a breath. His skull felt as large and unwieldly as the cathedral itself. "If you are who you claim," he said carefully, thinking about every word, "you already know the question I have come to ask. If you are not, there is no reason to even ask it." Logic was a broken reed that would pierce his hand, but he had nothing else on which to lean.

The voice laughed. "I claim nothing, Hugh. Maybe the answer lies inside your own head, and you've gone through a lot of trouble for nothing. But come on, come on. There's nothing for you to be afraid of. Not here. Not now." A giggle. "Is that what you came for, Hugh? It's a common enough question, and easily answered. Do you want to know the hour and place of your death?"

Solomon froze for a moment, breathing shallowly. If she was who the stories said she was, she really could tell him exactly that. Like a man gazing over a precipice, thinking idly of what it would be like to jump, he felt drawn in spite of himself. He would know everything, and his fate would be clear.

"No!" The word ripped from his throat. He leaned forward over her, into the light from the candle, his hands like claws. "You try to tell me and—"

"And what, Hugh? Don't be so silly. If I know when you are to die, I certainly know when I will. Not tonight, Hugh, I'm not going to die tonight. And neither are you, if I'm not giving anything away. So why don't we talk?"

Moira Moffette was a grossly fat woman, sprawled in what had once been the bishop's throne. The candlelight shone on the rich, filthy brocade of her dress and the rings sunk deep into the flesh of her fingers. A tiny pair of feet in embroidered slippers emerged from beneath her dress to hang in the air. Her face was round and smooth. Long lustrous lashes hid her blind eyes. She smiled at him, her teeth horrible and misshapen. "Do I match the description, Hugh? I hope you weren't expecting beauty. History is a festering wound, and those maggots that feed on it are never beautiful. Does that bother you, fellow maggot? Never mind, then. What did you bring me?" she asked, like an eager child.

He unwrapped the package. The foil paper crackled and sparkled. "A Sachertorte," he said. "From Demel's Konditorei, Vienna, 1889 CE." He'd stopped for a coffee, there in the mahogany and crystal interior, then walked out into the sunny spring warmth amid the ladies with their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

parasols and the gentlemen with their top hats, their faces as clear and open as the sky. He opened the box and the musty air filled with the rich chocolate aroma of Vienna.

"Ooooh!" Moffette squealed. "Hugh, you doll! Give it here, darling, give it here. Oh! Oh! With apricot preserves between the layers! Wonderful." She grabbed the cake with both hands, smearing frosting all over herself, took a bite and chewed, cheeks puffed out, eyes screwed up with pleasure. Lank, dirty hair hung around her face. Like certain holy men and mystics throughout history, she had the capability of synthesizing a Tempedrine-like chemical in her pineal gland. In order to do that, she needed a chemical precursor—Theobroma, the Food of the Gods: chocolate. Under its influence, the twists and turns of Time were visible to her. Who she was, and how she had come to be here in the twenty-first century ruins of Sacré-Coeur were facts unknown to anyone, though Solomon had tried to track down every lead and rumor. She might have been a Druid, a witch, a priestess of Magna Mater, a Neanderthal fertility goddess, a chocolate binging housewife with a deviant physiology, or simply an illusion of senses deranged by overdoses of Tempedrine.

"So, tell me, Hugh. What's your question?"

He paused for a moment, still unsure. "I want to find Andrew Tarkin."

She gasped and choked. Her blind eyes stared. "Oh, oh. But he's all over the place. He crosses over and over himself. How could you not have found him? After all, Hugh, you are in so many times and places yourself." Then she began to laugh, spilling half chewed bits of cake onto her front. "Vengeance!" she said. "It's a matter of private vengeance. You've always been so droll, Hugh."

"You've never met me before," he grated.

"But you *have* always been droll, haven't you, even if I've never met you? You don't think as clearly as you might, Hugh. But why have you come all this way to bother me with a silly personal matter?"

"It's not personal. The son of a bitch tried to kill me."

"Nothing more personal than that, is there, Hugh?"

"He's trying to deform Time itself, and that could kill all of us. Don't you understand?"

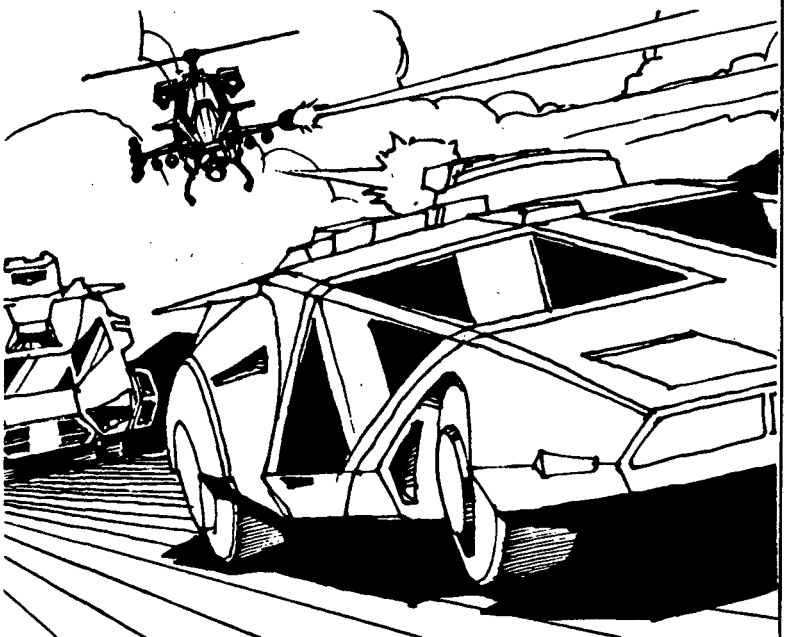
"Never having been born is not the same thing as dying, Hugh."

"Stop playing games," Solomon said. "You ate the cake, now answer the question."

"Little Miss Moffette sat on her Tophet," she chanted, like a small child. "Hear her words and pray." She giggled. "Like it? I thought it up myself. I wish I could figure out how to finish it. All right, Hugh. You want to find Andy Tarkin. Or at least you *think* you want to find Andy Tarkin. Whatever you say." Her eyes suddenly rolled up into her head and she began to shake. Her breath came sharply through her throat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Own The Road . . .
For Only $1.00



Remember the good old days when ice cream cones cost a nickel, science fiction magazines cost a dime, and you could buy a game for only a dollar?

Well, the good old days are back again. We're offering a complete game for only $1.00. This isn't just any game. It's ***Car Wars*** — the game of the freeways of the future. ***Mini Car Wars*** is a quick and easy-to-learn introduction to the larger, best-selling game. Included are rules, maps and full-color counters.

To receive your copy, send $1.00 ($1.08 for Texas residents). You'll also receive our FREE catalog! Order today for a taste of the good old days . . . and a taste of tomorrow.

STEVE JACKSON GAMES
Box 18957-J Austin, TX 78760

Car Wars is a registered trademark of Steve Jackson Games. All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and she made a sound like the barking of a small dog. After a few minutes, her breathing slowed. "Chicago, Hugh. The Levee. You've heard of it? June 12, 1902. A little bar, one of a hundred little bars, called The Lone Star Saloon and Palm Garden. Just after one in the morning, a table near the back. He'll be drinking what they call bourbon, but isn't." She leaned back and closed her eyes, obviously tired.

"But," Solomon said, "but. The Levee. That's where—"

She opened them again, angry. "I know where it is, Hugh. Think of it as old home week. I know that's where *she* is, our darling Louisa. I know that's where young man Hugh Solomon is also. You were probably a cute boy, Hugh. The Full Historian as a young man. Andy Tarkin is there, Hugh. *Not* the young one, young Hugh's friend. Not even the slightly older one who tried to drown you in the Baltic. It's the one you need to find. A long way to go to find an old friend, Hugh. That's what you asked me for, and that's what you got."

Solomon shook in a sudden chill. It was *cold* in that damn cathedral. How did she stand it, sitting there, eating nothing but chocolate? But, Jesus, Chicago. Not again.

"Now go away, Hugh. I've had enough of you. If you're smart, you'll just go back home to Time Center and forget all about this. People try to kill you all the time. You've got to learn not to take it so personally. Good night!" She blew out the candle and let Solomon find his way back to the front door in darkness.

June 1902 CE

Though it was after midnight, the streets were crowded. The Levee lay sprawled out around Solomon like a nickel whore who'd made enough to drink herself into a stupor. Probably the widest open vice district in the United States of America, it crammed no fewer than two hundred whorehouses into a few square blocks on the South Side of Chicago, along with taverns, dancing halls, gambling dens, dog-fighting pits, and hock shops. It was a favorite touring stop for visiting evangelists.

Solomon moved quickly through the fitfully gaslit streets, not looking around himself, for fear of seeing himself when young. His furtive air was usual for the Levee, and no one paid him any attention. Drunken laughter came from an open window in a three-story tenement. He slid past a black man with a bowler hat too large for his head who wanted to sell him some "goofer dust." Solomon resisted the sudden urge to stop and negotiate with him. It was sometimes too easy to adapt to the time in which one found oneself. Tempedrine brought the human mind into an identity with a time which was not its own. Solomon pushed his way through the swinging double doors of the Lone Star Saloon and Palm Garden.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Inside, it was dark, smoky, and raucous. Solomon walked, among wide laughing mouths gleaming with gold teeth and women's faces painted heavily into clown's masks of false joy, towards the figure slumped over the table in the back.

He hit Tarkin sharply below the left ear with his elbow to stun the brain centers responsible for time travel and injected him in the buttock with a needle he had strapped to his right knee. It was quick, and no one else in the bar noticed a thing.

Tarkin turned, his eyes already glazing. He managed an expression of hatred, though he could barely control the muscles of his face. "You again. You'll never learn, will you."

Solomon stared at him in horror, for this man was older than he was himself, not at all the young man who had trapped him on the *Dagmar* of Lubeck. Tarkin's once-red hair was white, and stood out in all directions. Solomon grabbed his hand roughly. Despite his sedation, Tarkin winced. "Where did you get this, Andy?" The gold ring on Tarkin's finger was a convenient focus for his rage.

Tarkin grinned weakly, but with triumph. "You don't really want to know. Believe me, you don't."

"I'm tired of people telling me what I don't want to know," Solomon said, injecting Tempedrine into Tarkin's carotid artery along with a synaptic impeder, to lower temporal inertia. It was hard to haul someone else through Time, impossible if they were not properly conditioned. The human mind, the only device capable of traveling through Time, tends to want to stay in its own time.

They left together, as if they were old friends, Solomon laughing and singing, Tarkin limp, stumbling. "Too much to drink, Billy," Solomon said, for the benefit of the others in the bar, who paid no attention. "I told you, but you just wouldn't listen . . . time to go home."

"Time," Tarkin muttered. "Time."

The back alley was a good place to leave from. A few prostrate bodies were scattered here and there, drunk or drugged, of no more account than the lampposts or the complaining cats. Solomon lowered Tarkin to the ground.

"Ssso how's th-the sailor?" Tarkin said, slurring. "I gave up trying to kill you after the *Dagmar,* you know. I figured you'd come to me, in the end. I was right." He dropped his head suddenly to the bricks of the alley with a hollow crack. Solomon checked his skull. He hadn't fractured it, but there would be a big bump tomorrow. What was Russian for "bump"? The language came hard now, but soon it would be almost impossible to speak or think anything else. Ah, yes. *Shishka.* That would do as well as anything.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Now let's find a few things out," Solomon said. He whispered the words of release, and the alley was empty.

February 1930 CE

Colonel Fedosyev leaned forward in his chair, resting his chin on his hands, and stared at prisoner Shishkin with loathing. It was only the fourth day of the interrogation, but he was already bone tired. Must be getting old. He'd once been able to run a seven day conveyor almost single-handed, and now look at him. His eyes were gritty, and each breath took a conscious effort. Damn, *he* wasn't the one sitting in the middle of the room on a hard wooden stool.

The cut crystal decanter, carefully polished, filled the room with sparkles when he poured himself a glass of water. He didn't want a drink, but the prisoner, fed on salty food and deprived of water, certainly did. Was he even watching? Fedosyev forced himself to swallow the tepid, flat liquid with every sign of satisfaction, smacking his lips. He felt bloated. He wanted to lie down and sleep a thousand years.

Water dribbled from the glass and made another dark spot on the tattered green baize of the desk, the color picked because it showed off gold. The Soviet State *needed* gold. "Let's give it another try, shall we?" Fedosyev said heavily. "The name of the jeweler, and his current whereabouts. Then you can have a drink of water and some sleep." Sleep! "Just don't give me any more Arabian Nights stuff. I'm not an idiot."

Shishkin didn't look as if he had heard. The parasite! He just sat there, babbling nonsense. Fedosyev had heard whispers that they were raising desperately needed foreign exchange by selling Rembrandts from the Hermitage to the millionaires of the West. And bastards, greedy bastards everywhere, were hoarding gold. The word had come down through the OGPU, the secret police: get it! Get the gold. Sweat them! Squeeze them! The nation needs it! So Shishkin, his white hair sticking out in every direction, sat slumped in the interrogation room like some pale insect and tired Fedosyev by telling him everything but what he wanted to know.

He pushed his chair back and walked around the desk. His boot heels clicked on the elaborate parquetry, now deeply scratched. The room had once been part of the Office of Textiles. Darker blue squares on the patterned wallpaper still showed where framed swatches had hung. Plaster cherubs, chipped and dusty, blew trumpets at the corners of the high ceiling.

It was a good one, no windup, no warning at all. The prisoner's face jerked sideways and he gasped. The smack of the backhanded slap filled the room for an instant and was gone. Captain Solomonov, silent at his secretary's desk with his pen, inkwell, and notebook, looked up from his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FINANCIAL ADVICE NEVER LOOKED SO GOOD.

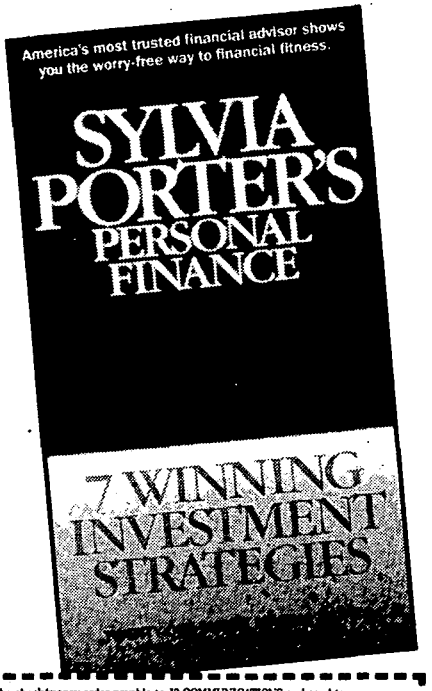
Even the best advice can sometimes be confusing. But with Sylvia Porter's Personal Finance Videos, powerful, moneymaking concepts come alive, forming simple, clear pictures in your mind.

In 7 WINNING INVESTMENT STRATEGIES, you see charts, graphs, and practical, everyday examples that show how you can profit from:

- home ownership
- real estate
- tax-advantaged investments
- when to buy or sell stocks
- higher income investments
- investing for growth and appreciation
- mutual funds

You'll discover sensible investments geared to your lifestyle, your family commitments, and your personal finance objectives. What's more, you'll see absolutely what *not* to do with your money.

So don't let another day pass. Use 7 WINNING INVESTMENT STRATEGIES to brighten your financial outlook.


America's most trusted financial advisor shows you the worry-free way to financial fitness.
SYLVIA PORTER'S PERSONAL FINANCE
7 WINNING INVESTMENT STRATEGIES

ONLY $29.95

CALL TOLL-FREE TODAY
1 (800) 453-9200
Or use coupon

© 1988 J2 Communications

Make check/money order payable to J2 COMMUNICATIONS and send to:
SYLVIA PORTER VIDEO · P.O. Box 3169 · Ogden, UT 84409

Yes! Please send me _____ SYLVIA PORTER'S PERSONAL FINANCE VIDEO(s) for $29.95 each (plus $3.00 shipping/handling per tape).

☐ VHS ☐ Beta

Method of Payment: ☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Check/Money Order

CREDIT CARD # |_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|_|

EXP. |_|_|_|_| SIGNATURE _____

Name _____ (Please Print)

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

AS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

writing, his lean, high-cheekboned face carefully expressionless. There was a little blood at the corner of the prisoner's mouth. Just a bead.

Fedosyev squatted, a huge bear of a man, took the prisoner's hand, and stared him in the face. Shishkin looked back intently, like a stranger watching an unfamiliar game, failing to puzzle out the rules that governed its play. "Gold is not a solitary beast like an eagle." Shishkin's face tightened as Fedosyev twisted his hand. "No. It is a herd animal. Like cows. Like sheep. So." He twisted farther. "Where are this one's brothers? And where is the shepherd?" The ring on the prisoner's finger glinted up at him.

In spite of himself, Fedosyev admired it for an instant. It was a snake biting its own tail, the shimmering intricacy of the pattern of scales definitely oriental. Its eyes were green jewels. No wonder the prisoner made up such fanciful stories. But it was gold, rich and heavy, and it was not more than a dozen years old, though it looked slightly melted, as if it had been through a hot fire.

Shishkin's body began to shake, and he sobbed. "I've told you," he whispered in his poor Russian. "It was made for me, to give to someone I loved. Long ago in . . . in—"

"In wondrous Araby?" Fedosyev roared."Scum! I'm tired of your fairy stories." He turned and stared out of the window, running his hand over his shaven scalp. The Kremlin towers loomed to the left against the darkening sky. Decent red stars were only now replacing the Imperial two-headed eagles that had continued to top them for the dozen years since the Revolution. What the hell was wrong? The man had obviously broken completely. He eagerly babbled details, complete descriptions of the jeweler, his habits, his place of work. If his mother had made the ring, Shishkin would have turned her in. Why then was everything he said obvious nonsense? The ring was real. So, therefore, by logical operations Fedosyev had forgotten since school but was sure still applied, was the jeweler. Only he sold earrings to the wives of Party officials, and lived in some sober city in Soviet Central Asia, not Baghdad, or Aleppo, or whatever it was he claimed. Fedosyev didn't like interrogating lunatics.

He squinted over at Solomonov, who sat attentively, pen ready on paper. Solomonov had brought the prisoner in himself, and seemed to cherish a particular interest in him, writing every detail of his impossible ravings down in his notebook. A personal concern, Fedosyev thought, from the village in which they had both grown up, or from the Gymnasium. An officer in the OGPU was well placed to pay off old scores.

With sudden irritation Fedosyev reached over, twisted the prisoner's arm behind him, and removed the ring. It slipped off with surprising

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ease. When he released him, Shishkin slumped back onto his stool and stared off at nothing.

"The caravans leave Aleppo in the winter," Shishkin said. "I saw it . . . the mosque of Jami Zakariyah gleamed blue. The man from Bukhara made her a ring of finest gold . . . I loved her, I thought he had burned her, he who had been my friend . . . I've guarded her for all these years."

Shishkin had reached a state in which the term "interrogation" was meaningless and Fedosyev suddenly lost all interest in continuing. It was only 1930, after all. Fedosyev and his kind were still moving inch by inch into savagery, like a man lowering himself into a hot bathtub. Ten years later such considerations would have seemed foolish, and Fedosyev would have known that every interrogation was a torture session from start to finish, with information being an irrelevant by-product, but ten years later Fedosyev would be lying in the gold fields of the Kolyma, frozen to death, having been arrested and interrogated in his turn.

He patted Shishkin on the back. "Had an old biddy in here the other day," he said, confidingly. "Country girl, thought herself smart. Held on a day and a half, then gave it up. Smart girl. Hid it inside the privy. *Down* inside. A real mess. That's capitalism for you. Two hundred counterfeit rubles, brass covered with gold. You should have heard her spit. 'The lice! The lice! You were right to shoot them!' " He chuckled at the memory, stopped short.

He sat down at his desk, pulled out a sheet of paper, and signed it. Without a word he pushed it towards Shishkin who, after a moment's incomprehension, also signed it. It was thus that prisoner Shishkin found himself sentenced to ten years in the corrective labor camps, under Section 10: Anti-Soviet Agitation.

Fedosyev tossed the ring into the air. It twirled and glittered, then vanished into his immense hand. Fedosyev was fed up with the whole thing. He was a brutal man but not an acquisitive one, showing the selectivity of vices as well as virtues, so he tossed the ring to Solomonov who, surprised, caught it clumsily.

"Take him downstairs," Fedosyev said. "He goes on the next transport." He looked out of the window. Snow had started sifting down from the sky that afternoon, and the dimly seen roofs beneath the window were already blanketed in white.

Solomon saluted the OGPU Colonel, who ignored this bit of military precision, and led Andy Tarkin out of the interrogation room. They walked through long halls lined with interrogation rooms and holding cells. Solomon whistled tunelessly and tried to ignore the presence of his prisoner, that anti-soviet parasite. It was good to be wearing the blue

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shoulder boards of the OGPU, watching officers of the Red Army act deferential, and full professors at Moscow University look frightened. It was good to be finally getting some respect . . . what the hell was he thinking? Solomonov . . . *Solomon* glanced over at the still expressionless Tarkin and tried to control his thoughts. He thought about the three-day interrogation, and wondered who the next criminal would be—no, dammit, he was *leaving,* not staying here in Moscow in 1930. He was going to Aleppo, to that time that the interrogation had revealed. Maybe there he could sort out his thoughts. Too much Tempedrine wasn't good for you. It really wasn't.

He led Tarkin down the broad stairs, brass rods attempting to hold down a long vanished carpet, and turned him over to the lieutenant at the desk, along with the paper with the sentence. He left him there to vanish into the empire of the corrective labor camps. He doubted that the elderly Shishkin would survive the first year of his ten year sentence. Solomon strolled down the marble-floored hallway, turned a corner, and disappeared.

The lieutenant filled out the proper paperwork. Prisoner Shishkin was sent to a cell in Butyrki Prison. After a month in a cell with forty other prisoners, he was taken, at night, by Black Maria, to the Kaluga Gates Transit Prison, on the outskirts of Moscow. After two weeks, he was put aboard a train heading east, towards his eventual destination, Sovetskaya Gavan, on the other side of the Soviet Union. The journey would take several months. The train was stopped on a siding near Irkutsk for a week and a half, and when they were ready to move again and mustered the prisoners in order to unload the bodies of those who had frozen in the unheated cars, no trace of prisoner Shishkin could be found. The other prisoners were beaten, but no one could even remember what Shishkin had looked like. The guards put their heads together, and prisoner Shishkin vanished from their records as thoroughly as he had succeeded in vanishing from the box car, and their time.

November 949 CE

"Pull out my soul, oh Lord," Abdullah Ibn-Umar al-Bukhari whispered to himself as he drew the gold wire through the iron die, reducing its diameter yet again, "until I am infinitely long, and lost in thinness." The wire was now the thickness of a grass stem, suitable for making earrings, but al-Bukhari was not planning to stop until it was barely less fine than human hair, for he had more delicate work in mind. "Step by step our fineness increases but we never manage to approach Thee, oh Allah." With a sharp knife he shaved the first inch of wire, then put it into the next smaller hole on the die. He took the end in his tongs and pulled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Looking for a big one-of-a-kind gift? How about the infinite riches of the Universe...delivered in 13 bright, fascinating packages?

Why give knick-knacks for Christmas when for a stocking stuffer of a price, you can give your friends the sun, the moon and all the stars. Delivered thirteen times throughout the coming year in the pages of **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine**.

Once-a-year holiday rates are now in effect. The first subscription to **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine** costs only **$19.50**. Each additional subscription is even less—just **$14.97**.

And you can complete your **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction** gift giving in a matter of minutes. Just fill out the form below or if you prefer, call us with your order **toll free: 1-800-247-2160**, Operator #300 (in Iowa, call 1-800-362-2860.)

Gift subscriptions received by December 1st will start at the holiday season. Orders that arrive subsequently will begin with the current issue. Greeting cards will be sent to announce your gift.

Mail To:
Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine
P.O. Box 1933
Marion, Ohio 43306

☐ Payment Enclosed ☐ Bill me after January 1.

Gift For:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Bill To:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Sign Gift Card _____

MSA9S-2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again."Take the metal away, and we do not exist, but are of Thee, oh Lord." Muscles stood out in his bare shoulder and arm.

The world was a crystal that sang as it was stroked by the hand of Allah. Men cupped their ears, but heard nothing but whispers and echoes. As he worked, al-Bukhari heard ominous noises, the sounds of crashing waves, dying men. Echoes distort and transform, turning good into evil. The gleaming wire was a golden snake, writhing in agony, twisting itself around the sphere of the Earth until it could take its tail in its own jaws, starting flames with the rubbing of its belly. He smelled the acrid stink, tasted bitter gall at the back of his throat. He stopped pulling, and put his hands over his eyes. He felt the flames of burning and heard the screaming of a horse. A man's soul was consumed by the flames, leaving ashes. It was bad this time. "Oh Lord, Thy visions tear like Greek lances through my heart." And suddenly, all was clear, and the wire was wire, simple gold. He picked up the tongs and resumed his task.

"Excuse me." At the front of al-Bukhari's shop stood a tall man, with a strong jaw and high cheekbones, in the garb of a traveling merchant. His eyes glowed with pain and rage, of guilt and hatred unsatisfied, or so al-Bukhari imagined. He felt that the man had just come from committing a terrible act. Al-Bukhari's first wife Fatima was a sensible woman who had often urged him to curb his fantastic visions. He always promised her, and always broke his promise. He could not explain to her that they came from outside their time, because he did not know this himself. Al-Bukhari felt a moment of fear, not for himself, but on the stranger's account. The man carried a heavy load, and his soul wobbled, splay-footed, like a camel about to collapse. "I am called Suleiman Ibn-Mustar," the stranger said. "May we speak?"

Al-Bukhari got up, and bustled to the front of the shop. Customers should always be treated well, as Fatima had often explained. Al-Bukhari was a stocky, slightly plump man in his mid-thirties, his short beard already going gray. He had a sidewards gaze and a strong voice that made him a Koran reader most Fridays at the mosque. "Come in and sit."

They sat cross-legged on the carpet, and were served cooling drinks of rosewater and honey by Zaynab, al-Bukhari's second wife. She vanished through the door at the back of the shop into the darkness of the house. As he talked, al-Bukhari occasionally turned away to feed his brazier. The shop was full of precisely arranged hammers, tongs, tweezers, anvils, and other equipment. "How may I help you?" al-Bukhari said.

Solomon suddenly felt confusion. What did his quest have to do with this energetic little man and his life in this corner of Time? Yet, somehow, this man seemed important. "I wish to buy," he said.

Al-Bukhari showed him his work, mostly in gold and enamel, earrings,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

turban pins, and bridle ornaments. "You are not from this place," Solomon said. He picked up a bracelet and hung it on his wrist, letting a beam of sunlight fall on it and shatter into glittering splinters.

"No," al-Bukhari said. "I am from Bukhara. That is over two months' journey from here."

"You must miss your home." He set the bracelet down and picked up a jewel-box of carnelian and onyx. "Your work is excellent. Your gifts would not have been unwelcome at the wedding of al-Ma'mun, or the royal banquet of al-Mutawakkil."

Al-Bukhari colored with pleasure. "Your words do me honor, Suleiman. Those two occasions have no third in Islam. But my home? Ah, how could you know? The valley of Sogdiana is one of the four earthly paradises. The gardens and orchards . . . Syria is a dry place." He crinkled his slanted, oriental eyes, remembering. He thought about his cheating uncle, and about the power of visions and the hand of God, but did not speak of them. Instead he pulled out a box, on impulse. "You have not seen these."

Solomon stared down at the rings in the box, each a gleaming, pure circle of gold. Thinking of the ring he had in his pouch, he looked at each in turn. What a hoard! How delighted Fedosyev would have been. In this single market he could have made enough arrests to keep him in interrogations for the rest of his life.

But the ring he was looking for was not there. They showed a similar technique, though a different style.

He looked at al-Bukhari. "Have you sold a ring recently, in the shape of a serpent with its own tail in its mouth?"

"A serpent . . . no, I have never made such a ring." He looked frightened. "With its tail in its mouth. . . ." How could Suleiman have known of his vision of the golden serpent? He stood up, suddenly agitated. "Please . . . I must get back to work. It is getting late." This man Suleiman, he realized again, was dangerous. Who was he? What evil did he represent?

Solomon stood also, surprised and himself suddenly suspicious. Did the jeweler know more than he was letting on? Was he an ally of Tarkin's? He wished he had Fedosyev back, and a comfortable interrogation room where he could uncover the truth. . . .

Al-Bukhari walked quickly to the front of the shop, and froze. Across the street, walking amid the crowds, he saw an Ifrit. He dared not breathe. Why did an evil djinni walk abroad?

A holy man, his voice sonorous against the screaming background, led a gaggle of students towards the blue-domed mosque of Jami Zakariyah, where he would lecture in the courtyard. For all his knowledge of the Koran and the Law, he walked right past the Ifrit without perceiving

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it. A wealthy noble, turbaned and bearded, peered moodily into a crystal sphere at a stall across the way, while his Greek slave declaimed Aristotle in bad Arabic. The Ifrit jostled his arm, but aside from a glance of irritation, he did not notice it. The Ifrit wore the face of guilt, and stalked its victim with staring, mad eyes. Al-Bukhari watched with fascination as it pulled its headdress across the lower part of its face, leaving only those staring eyes, and drew a sword. It keened like a newly widowed woman, and attacked.

Suleiman swore in some harsh foreign language and drew his own sword with lightning speed. The two blades met with a bold ringing and slid along each other, the unexpected resistance causing the Ifrit to stumble back. It seemed old, somehow, old and slow. Up and down the street were sounds of fear and concern as merchants either hid themselves or tried to protect their merchandise, depending on their personalities.

"Tarkin!" Solomon shouted. But what argument could he use? Tarkin had every reason to want to kill him. How had he escaped from the train car? Or was this yet another Tarkin, a younger one? A younger Tarkin from a time before the Moscow interrogation could not be killed, since he had to continue to exist, but there was no time to think about paradoxes.

The other clumsily attacked again. Solomon was fascinated by the other's eyes. What had they looked upon? His assailant's reflexes were slow. As the attacking blade moved, Solomon darted aside and drove his blade home. The other fell to the street.

Solomon reached forward to pull aside the covering so that he could look Tarkin in the face, but looked up as he heard the hiss of swords being drawn from scabbards. A body of armed men was approaching, cautiously. The local gendarmerie. Without another thought, he turned and ran. Solomon lost his pursuers for long enough to dart into a cul-de-sac, slap an ampoule of Tempedrine against his neck, and disappear from that time.

June 1902 CE

Eras before the First World War were the easiest to travel in without preparation, because everyone took gold, though sometimes at a ruinous discount. Solomon darted up the street and into a doorway beneath the three gold balls of a pawnbroker. He sold the bemused proprietor his suddenly ridiculous clothes and bought an ill-fitting pair of work pants held up by a length of rope and a wool shirt, much too warm for the day. With these clothes he walked farther up the street and bought a decent suit of clothes. Used to the sudden accesses of wealth that came to gamblers and criminals, this proprietor made no remark about the exchange of rough work clothes for a dress shirt and a suit of light gray gabardine.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yet farther up the street he exchanged gold for dollars, then rented a room in a boarding house with a shared kitchen and an outhouse in the back, and prepared to make his investigation. He was only a few blocks from where he and Tarkin had lived—*were* living—during their research, but he had already violated so many Time Center regulations that he did not let this bother him.

With slow patience, he searched, starting conversations in bars, in stores, on the El. A number of people in and around the Levee had seen Tarkin: some described him as old, while others said he was young. Many professions were ascribed to him. Solomon walked the streets all day and all night, searching every face he passed. Chicago had over a million and a half people in 1902. There were a lot of faces to look at.

He was led to the first Tarkin he saw by a small boy who earned his two bits. Solomon passed by the plate glass window of a drug store and saw a middle-aged man wiping down the counter with a white cloth.

The second Tarkin, somewhat younger, drove a milk cart. The third Tarkin was an old man who told people's fortunes, while the fourth was another middle-aged man who worked in a dry goods store. By the time Solomon had seen seven different versions of Andy Tarkin he stopped counting. Each had a somewhat different disguise, hair color, pair of glasses, and posture, but it wasn't difficult to spot them once you knew what you were looking for. Each wore a gold ring.

Tarkin would have given the Controllers of Time Center screaming fits. He had doubled back on his own life, over and over, weaving a web of himself around that incident which had forever directed his life and Solomon's. But, Solomon thought as he passed yet another version of Tarkin, this one pushing a knife-sharpening cart, he had obviously never succeeded in changing one damn thing about what had happened. As demonstrably physical as it was, Tarkin's obsession about the past had no more effect on things than such obsessions ever did.

But now Solomon had obsessions of his own to deal with, for it was once again late afternoon on June 11. Before the night was through, he would find out what really had happened at Mrs. Mulvaney's boarding house. "Just think of it as historical research," he told himself, as he walked that long familiar path up the cobblestones of Harrison St. from the end of the streetcar line, past the corner of Wilmot, where Mr. Kirkby kept his prize sow Ernestine in her pen by his front steps, and up Furnace St. to Mrs. Mulvaney's three story mansard-roofed boarding house with the crazily leaning barn next to it.

It was a warm day, with a high and clear afternoon. How many times had Tarkin already lived it?

He was stopped cold by a woman's laugh. A man's laugh answered it.

"It's true," the man's voice insisted. "The Japanese use hard wooden

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blocks for pillows. So when one of their ambassadors was staying at the Hotel Willard in Washington, where the pillows are full of down, and found the chamber pot under the bed, he used that instead and slept quite well."

"Oh, Hugh," Louisa said, still laughing. "That still doesn't explain why the first time you tried to use a gas jet you almost burned your hair off."

"Where I come from, in North Dakota—"

"Oh, stop that!"

"All right, Tibet. We use yak butter there."

Solomon felt wonder. Had he really ever been that young, that easy? Could he ever have flirted so casually with the landlady's daughter? He peeked around the edge of the porch. There he sat, lean and young, his hair greased back, wearing a blue seersucker suit and a straw boater. He looked as if he didn't have a care in the world. Louisa sat across from him, kicking up her heels, dressed in a blue shirtwaist dress with puffy sleeves. Her hair was curly black and her dark eyes darted all around as she talked.

"Mrs. Mulvaney says that dinner is almost ready," a third voice said. The tousled ginger hair of Tarkin's head poked around the edge of the door.

"Oh, Andy, sit down, sit down with us." Louisa jumped up and pulled him down next to her, opposite Solomon, so that she was flanked by her two suitors, the two history students who had had to come eight hundred years into their own pasts to learn what life and love really were.

"You look very well, Mr. Tarkin."

"Never felt better, Mr. Solomon."

The old Full Historian Solomon rested his forehead on the cool granite of the boarding house's foundation. This was the last afternoon that either of them would ever be truly at peace. After this it would be nothing but endless blow and counter-blow, watching massacres, plagues, and disasters, of never knowing an instant's peace, for they would both have ceased to be the sort of men who would recognize peace if they were offered it. He stood and listened to them talk and flirt until they were finally called in.

As they went in to dinner, Solomon heard Tarkin say, shyly, "I . . . I have something for you, Louisa. I had it made specially. I'll show you after dinner."

The fire had started in the old barn, which was dry as tinder after three weeks with no rain. His guts cold and hard as ice within him, Solomon commenced to watch the house and its barn, to wait for the moment when the flames would emerge and consume everything, making him the man he now was.

The night grew cool, giving up the summer warmth of the afternoon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A breeze sprang up off the lake. The Mulvaney household spread out on the porch and talked in a desultory way. Eleven o'clock passed, announced by the bells of a church, and midnight approached. Still no hint of a fire starting, and it had started just at midnight, the time his younger self usually went to bed.

He climbed into a window of the barn and looked around inside. Jenny, Mrs. Mulvaney's brown mare, nickered softly in the darkness. There was no open flame, such as the kerosene lamp Mrs. O'Leary's legendary cow had kicked over to start the great Chicago fire of 1871. The silage was fresh, and was kept turned over to prevent fermentation, which could get hot enough to start a smoldering fire. Outside, he could hear the bell of the church tolling the twelve strokes of midnight.

In doing their research to recover what had been lost in the Great Forgetting, the Historians of Time Center sometimes inadvertently caused temporal paradoxes. Such paradoxes had to be resolved. Solomon's duty as a Full Historian was explicit. The fire had happened. He had witnessed it. Thus, the fire *would* happen. Mechanically, because thinking might have stopped him, he pulled off some of the drier stalks of grass and piled them against one of the barn walls. Shaking, he untied Jenny, who nuzzled him curiously.

"You lived," he whispered. "The rest of us didn't." He unbolted the door of the barn so that the horse would be able to open it by pushing against it, then without any further hesitation, walked back to the pile of straw, struck a safety match, and touched it to the tinder.

In a minute the dry boards of the wall were burning as well. The flames were hot on his face, and the roar as loud as Niagara Falls, which Louisa had always wanted to see.

The fire spread like wine spilled on the floor. The roof of the barn exploded into flame all at once. Jenny neighed in terror, pounded herself against the barn doors, and escaped onto the street. The barn was filling up with smoke, and already the beams overhead creaked as they were eaten away by the fire. Solomon turned. Standing in the open doorway, staring at him, was the young Tarkin, barefoot, obviously interrupted in his preparations for bed. Tarkin shook his head, as if unable to believe what he was seeing. It would take some moments, Solomon knew, for his astonishment to turn into bitter rage and hatred and not much longer to change him from a friend to an enemy.

"Andy!" Solomon shouted, above the roar of the flames. "Wait!"

But Tarkin was gone, running back towards the house, shouting "Louisa!"

Solomon ran out after him. The blaze had spread from the barn to the house it leaned against, and flames were already leaping out of the third floor dormer windows. Mrs. Mulvaney and her son Arnold were even at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that moment escaping through a second floor window onto the bough of a sycamore that stood near the house. His younger self, having been smoking a last pipe on the porch before going to bed, would get into the house and make it halfway up the front stairs before being driven back by the flames. Louisa's room was on the second floor, facing the alley in back.

Tarkin tried to get up to Louisa's window, but the fire was already licking the wall from base to roof, and he too was forced back. He called her name up at the blazing window. Then, "The bastard," he yelled, no longer at Louisa's window, but at the world in general. "The bastard! Why?"

This was how it started. Solomon walked down to the street. The fire, Louisa's death, Tarkin's apparently unmotivated and savage hatred: these had all helped make him the man he was, the hard, cold, duty-bound Full Historian of Time Center. But all of these things were the results of acts which he himself had committed precisely *because* he was the man he was. He felt drained, meaningless, a rolling hoop. Tarkin had every reason to hate him, but Tarkin would take that hatred out on an innocent man, thus turning him into a man who would someday be worthy of hatred. Before the night was out, Tarkin would try to kill the young Hugh Solomon, and, failing, vanish into Time. Tarkin would keep trying to kill Solomon until that time when Solomon, old and bitter, would return to even the score. The old Full Historian walked, slowly, down pitch-black Wilmot and out onto Harrison, brighter, since it had gaslights.

Solomon froze. In the bright light in front of Masterson's General Store was a two-wheeled trap, with a sway-backed gray horse hitched to the front. Sitting in it, a straw hat tied to her head and a heavy valise at her feet, was Louisa.

Solomon neither rubbed his eyes nor pinched himself. He knew instantly that he was indeed seeing what was before him, and that it was the punch line to the shaggy dog story that his life was revealed to be. A young man emerged from the store with a package. He was Steven Eichorn, who lived a few blocks away and was studying at the University of Chicago to be a lawyer. He was "Louisa's young man," Solomon supposed, and his belatedly revealed existence explained a lot about Louisa's behavior in the few months preceding the fire. Eichorn leaped into the trap with excessive energy, took the reins, and drove it away down the street.

Solomon felt the sharp edge of a knife blade at his ribs. "I thought I'd *never* get to you," Tarkin said. He turned Solomon around.

This was a stoop-shouldered Tarkin, as old as the man Solomon had sent to a Soviet prison camp.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Was it worth using yourself up?" Solomon said. "Tying your entire life into a knot?"

"It was," Tarkin said. "I wanted to love her. But you can't recover love, even if you can recover exactly the person who made you love in the first place. Time travel is funny that way, Hugh. It makes you think that you can finally recover the past, but it's just memory made solid, so that it can hurt you even more. But I tried. I came back here after the last time I tried to kill you, aboard the *Dagmar*, and finally found out that Louisa hadn't died in that fire. If you'd looked just now you would have seen me, standing on the other side of Masterson's, looking just as stupid as you. That was when I decided to stay here, always. She fell in love with young Eichorn—"

"He was older than we were, Andy."

Tarkin smiled. "One forgets these things. Wasn't it amazing, to watch us there, on that porch?"

"We were happy. And that moment always exists."

"Cold comfort." Urged by Tarkin's knife, which remained at Solomon's ribs, despite the ease of their conversation, they walked down the street, two old friends leaning on each other for support. "But I did what I could. I arranged for Eichorn to get that trap. I encouraged them to elope. And this evening, about ten years ago for me, I think, I hauled a sheep carcass into Louisa's room. When the ashes had cooled they hauled the remains of Louisa's body out of the fire. She left the ring I gave her on her nightstand, and I found it in the ruins of the house.

"You went to the funeral. Forensic medicine leaves a lot to be desired in 1902, the coroner was drunk, the fire took place in a less than respectable neighborhood, and he gave the matter about ten minutes of his time. Louisa Mulvaney burned to death in an accidental fire. That was the verdict, Hugh. And you, you stupid son of a bitch, believed him, just like I did. You thought you were killing the woman you had once loved, but you were just cooking a rack of lamb."

They walked slowly along, Solomon staring forward blankly, the immediacy of the past overwhelming him, until the sounds and smells around him told him that they were once again in the Levee, which never slept.

"This is a good place," Tarkin said as they entered the Lone Star Saloon and Palm Garden. "I believe you know it." The place was the same, the lights were the same, the teeth were the same, the faces were the same.

"Hey, Mickey!" Tarkin shouted at the bartender. "Give us one of your Specials! And I'll have a gin."

In a minute, a large glass of murky liquid was placed in front of Solomon, who stared at it dully.

"Drink up," Tarkin said. "It will make you feel better."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Solomon looked at him. "You tried to kill me, the young man I was. Why, Andy? I hadn't done anything."

"Shut up and drink."

Solomon shrugged, and with somewhat the air of Socrates drinking the cup of hemlock, drained it. He made a face.

Tarkin leaned back and looked at the sign that was just visible behind the bar. "Try the Mickey Finn Special," it said. Not yet proverbial, the mickey was, in Chicago in 1902, a new innovation in the art of rolling customers, chloral hydrate and alcohol.

With a loud groan, Solomon's eyes rolled up in his head, and he toppled from his chair. "Why did I pursue the young Hugh Solomon? Because I knew that eventually it would bring me to the man who *was* guilty," Tarkin said. "I have you now, you son of a bitch."

Solomon's body suddenly vanished. Staring, Tarkin sat heavily back in his chair. He shivered and took a gulp of his gin. "I can't start all over again," he said to himself. "I can't."

He was still sitting that way, slumped forward over his drink, when he felt the sharp blow of an elbow on the left side of his head, and the cold slide of a hypodermic needle into his buttock.

November 949 CE

Solomon stumbled along the street in Aleppo. He wore a heavy wool cloak, which he had bought to throw over his light gray gabardine suit, the height of fashion in early twentieth century Chicago. He regretted having sold his suit of merchant's clothes to the clothing dealer. He stopped by a stall and, with his last coins, bought a short, curved sword, not stopping to haggle with the proprietor.

There was yet a chance of stopping everything, he thought to himself. He was dizzy and sick. Visions of flames and abandoned cathedrals flashed before his eyes, and the long tiled hallways of Time Center. The mickey and his Tempedrine overdoses had caused him to slide through Time like a wet bar of soap on a shower floor. His palm was sweaty on the pommel of the sword.

Finally he saw him standing in front of the shop of al-Bukhari, tall and lean, talking to the short, stocky jeweler. Hatred overwhelmed him. He raised his sword and, screaming, attacked.

The earlier Solomon parried the attack skillfully. Despairing and weakened by the drugs in the Mickey Finn, the later Solomon was no match for him, and the penetration of the other's blade was a release from pain. He fell to the dusty street. The other Solomon fled.

Al-Bukhari approached the figure sprawled in front of his shop. Was it indeed an Ifrit? Ifrits were tormentors and tricksters, but the guilts and sins of men were not normally their concern, for their essential

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

substance was fire, not earth. And they certainly did not bleed, blood pooling at its belly as it curled around its mortal wound. He pulled the cloth away from the face and stared into Solomon's eyes.

"Zaynab!" he called over his shoulder. "Some water. Quickly!" He knelt down and rested the man's head on his lap. Zaynab ran out of the shop and paused, eyes wide, when she saw the bleeding man. She handed the cup to al-Bukhari and he put it to the other's lips. "You are not his brother. Nor are you a djinni in his image, as first I thought. You are he himself."

Solomon choked. "I am. He will now commit great . . . sins. I wanted to stop him. But it is impossible. Everything was fixed in its place, and I could do nothing."

"Your sins are your own," al-Bukhari said. "Did you not choose whether to commit them?" He closed his eyes and saw a ship full of dead men blow ashore in sand dunes on the shores of a cold gray sea. A house burned and a horse screamed. Men froze to death in a box in the snow. They were tied together in a knot, like that in the elaborate calligraphy on the dome of a mosque. And the name of the knot was Guilt.

"I had to . . . history . . . what happened had to happen or else. . . ."

"What happened happened because you made it so," al-Bukhari said, in a moment of total mental transparency. He scarcely knew what he was saying. "Only then was it inevitable. Your fate, friend, lay in your character, not in Time."

"Fate. Here is a piece of fate for you, al-Bukhari. Do with it what you will. In less than six years, the Byzantine Emperor, Nicephoras Phocas, will invade Syria, and sack and burn this city of Aleppo. You miss Bukhara, that beautiful land. Let that be your guide. And perhaps it will go a short way towards absolving me. But now . . . take this, take this ring." He pulled it from his finger. It was in the shape of a snake biting its own tail, and had eyes that were chips of emerald. And so, with a final sigh, Solomon died.

The images faded from al-Bukhari's mind, and there was just a market street with a dead man in the middle of it, and he had blood on his shirt. Others came and took the body away.

June 1902 CE

The old man stood behind the barn, bent wearily against the picket fence that marked the end of the lot, looking up at the lights of the Mulvaney house. The night lake breeze was cool but nowhere near as cold as it had just been in the railway car on the siding in Siberia. He shivered. Tarkin, near death, had time traveled without an injection of Tempedrine, to return here, to the heart of events. It was just before midnight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In a few minutes Solomon would come around the house to set the barn on fire, so that history would take its proper course. Tarkin slowly worked his way through the sycamore saplings that grew between the barn and the fence. He supported himself on each as he passed, feeling the bark of the young trees smooth in his hand. Last year's grass rustled beneath his feet.

A small flame flickered in front of him. He stopped and squinted. Two boys, about ten years old, crouched at the corner of the barn trying to light a pipe. It was not a corncob but a heavy meerschaum, probably stolen from a father's study. They muttered to each other, intent on their business, and did not see Tarkin. One of the boys burned his finger, swore, and dropped the match in the dry grass. It flared up instantly. The boys yelped and fled.

The grass caught quickly, and the fire soon started to lick up near the barn wall. Tarkin looked at it for several moments, mesmerized by the flames, then walked over and stomped it out.

He looked around the corner of the barn. A tall figure in a gabardine suit walked stiffly from the Mulvaney house to the back barn window. A bell tolled the twelve strokes of midnight.

"That's it then, Hugh," Tarkin whispered. He ground out the last hot ashes of the fire with his heel. "We made our choices, and they made us." Solomon opened the barn window and climbed in. Tarkin vanished into the cool night air.

November 949 CE

Al-Bukhari squatted and looked at the ring in the palm of his hand, wondering. A shadow loomed over him.

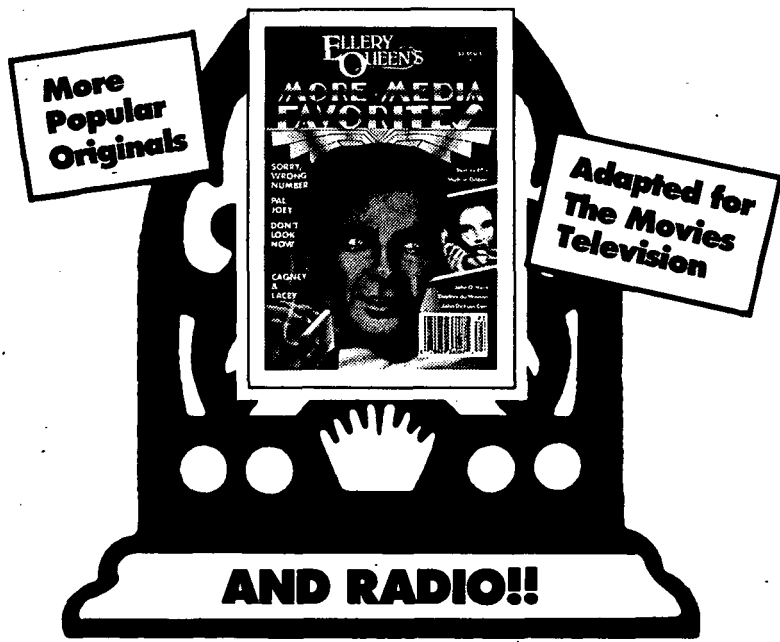
"Are you the jeweler al-Bukhari?" said a young man, very pale, with wild reddish hair. A northerner, a Russian perhaps. His eyes glowed. In love, probably, al-Bukhari thought to himself. When the dead have been cleaned away, there is still time to love.

"I am." He stood. There would be time to think about the flames that would consume Aleppo. He did miss Bukhara dreadfully. . . .

"I came here to have you make a ring for someone important." The young Tarkin pointed at the ring al-Bukhari held in his hand. "I have heard of your skill, and know that you can do it. I would like a ring, if possible, very much like that one." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ELLERY QUEEN'S MORE MEDIA FAVORITES



MAIL TO: ELLERY QUEEN ANTHOLOGIES, P.O. BOX 40, VERNON, NJ 07642

Please send me the ELLERY QUEEN anthologies indicated.
Enclosed is my check for $ _____.

- ☐ #59 MORE MEDIA FAVORITES ($4.50)
- ☐ #58 MEDIA FAVORITES ($4.50)
- ☐ #57 PRIME CRIMES 5 ($4.50)
- ☐ #56 Bad Scenes ($4.50)
- ☐ #55 Prime Crimes 4 ($4.50)
- ☐ #54 Blighted Dwellings ($4.50)
- ☐ #53 Prime Crimes 3 ($4.50)
- ☐ #51 Prime Crimes 2 ($4.50)
- ☐ #50 Memorable Characters ($4.50)
- ☐ #47 Lost Men ($3.95)
- ☐ #46 Lost Ladies ($3.95)

DSA959-0

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

PLEASE ALLOW 6 TO 8 WEEKS FOR DELIVERY. AVAILABLE ONLY IN THE U.S.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CURSE OF THE GHOST'S WIFE

by Bruce Boston

To spend the day
sated and insecure,
never knowing where
he stands or when
he could appear
with strange demands
from beyond the veil.

To hear the creaking
boards and realize
her lover's tread
is no different than
the witless sighs
of her haunted house
settling into ruin.

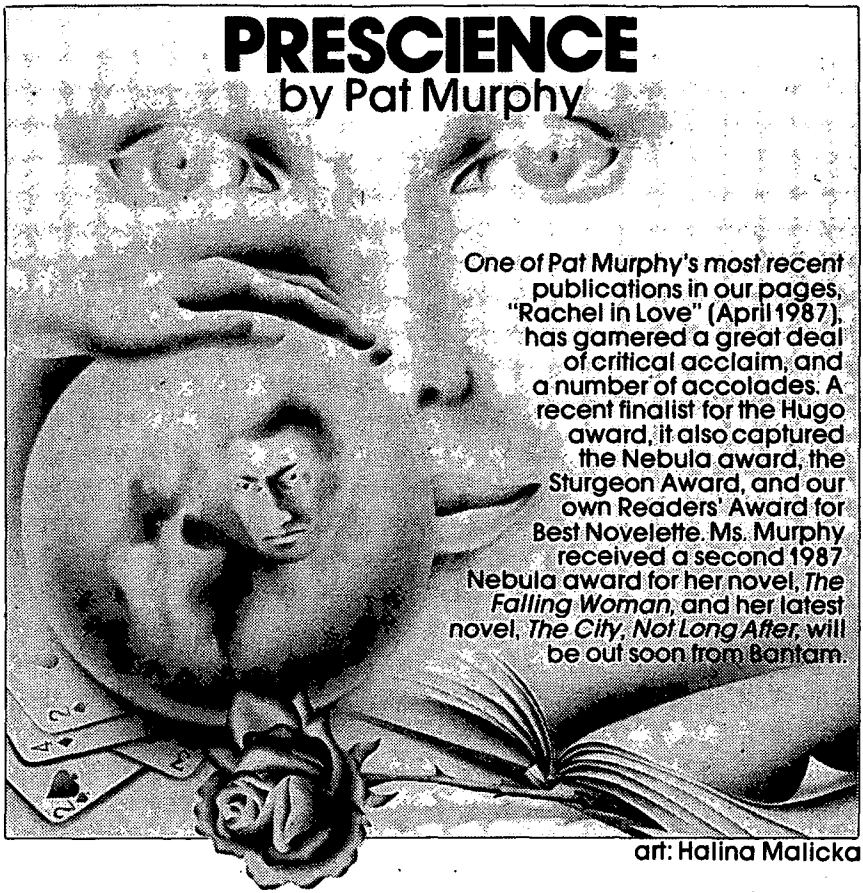
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

To wait through
the darkening hours
for his milky white
ambulation to solidify
and beckon her to bed,
where he rides her long,
with no mean effort,
into the chiaroscuro
of incipient dawn.

To see him rise up
from their excitation
and try on shapelessness
as shadows take,
to watch him stream
beneath the door
like lathered smoke,
to feel his ectoplasm
dry in strange ineradicable
patterns on her sheets,
to sense the silence
of his ever presence
closing down about her
like a graven sleeve,
to spend the day
sated and insecure,
to wait through
the darkening hours
for his milky white
ambulation to appear.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PRESCIENCE
by Pat Murphy



One of Pat Murphy's most recent publications in our pages, "Rachel in Love" (April 1987), has garnered a great deal of critical acclaim, and a number of accolades. A recent finalist for the Hugo award, it also captured the Nebula award, the Sturgeon Award, and our own Readers' Award for Best Novelette. Ms. Murphy received a second 1987 Nebula award for her novel, The Falling Woman, and her latest novel, The City, Not Long After, will be out soon from Bantam.

art: Halina Malicka

Katherine knew the future: she read it in the tarot cards, in the lines on a person's palm, in tea leaves, in horoscopes, in the way a man sat in a chair, in the way a woman placed her money on the counter when she paid for the fortune. She kept a dream journal, and her dreams, all too often, came true.

Though her predictions were accurate, her customers were usually dissatisfied. The futures that Katherine saw were never happy. In calm and measured tones, she told them of coming disasters: broken marriages, lost jobs, spoiled vacations, disappointments in love. People rarely returned for a second reading.

It was just after noon, and Katherine sat on a high stool at the counter of the occult store where she worked. The shelves behind her were filled with the paraphernalia of magic: vials of graveyard dust, bottles of holy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

water, cannisters filled with mandrake root, jimson seed, powdered bone, and incense. Her boss had gone out to lunch and she was eating her lunch, a container of lowfat yogurt.

The string of bells that hung on the doorknob jingled and a man walked into the store. She glanced at him, then returned to her yogurt. Generally, the customers did not wish to be observed too closely. This one prowled among the bookshelves for a time, then finally approached the counter.

"Hello," he said. "I'd like to have my fortune read."

She looked up and met his eyes. Of course, she remembered his face. Last night, she had dreamed exactly this: he came into the shop, she read his palm, and then he asked her out for coffee.

"Can't be done," she said briskly. "Our fortune teller's gone. She ran off with the carnival."

"Don't you read palms?"

"Nope. Sorry. Can't help you."

He didn't look like a bad sort. But already, she knew too much about him. By the way he held his shoulders and the tilt of his head, she knew he was lonely and a little nervous about being in the shop. He had nice eyes: dark and wistful. But she knew better and she refused to be drawn in. She didn't need to see the lines on his palm to know that he was trouble. She could see the clouds and predict the coming storm. Going out with him would be a disaster.

"Sorry," she said again. "It's really too bad."

She looked down at her yogurt, not wanting to know any more. "Awfully sorry," she said, and kept her eyes down until she heard the bells jingle and knew that he was gone.

After lunch, she had a cup of jasmine tea. When she finished her tea, she thoughtlessly glanced into the bottom of the cup where the loose tea leaves had accumulated. His face was there, plain enough for anyone who knew how to see it.

Her boss was a toad of a man, a squat Hungarian who burned incense to gain power over women. He read palms, and whenever he could, he grabbed Katherine's hand and examined the lines of her palm. His hands were sweaty and he always held on a little too long.

"You're afraid," he said. "Your heart and your life line cross—a sign of uncertainty." She peered unwillingly into her own palm. It seemed to her that there were more lines each day, crisscrossing her palm like bird tracks in the sand. The lines made her nervous: too many decisions, too many choices, too many fates. "I think you are afraid of men," he said.

She snatched her hand away and went to tidy the cannisters of herbs. She saw him staring at her from across the shop, but she ignored him. He was harmless enough. She never saw him in her dreams.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Two in the morning: she woke up and scrambled for the light, for a pen, for her dream journal. It was important to note the details quickly, before they blurred and lost their definition. She wrote:

"A coffee shop on Haight Street. The dark-haired man across the table takes my hand and asks me something. I can't hear him because the pounding of my heart is too loud. I am terrified, overcome by panic."

She hesitated, groping for more details. With details, she can protect herself.

"I am wearing my favorite silver bracelet and a peasant blouse. There's a cup of coffee on the table in front of me. He strokes my hand gently; I like his touch on my skin."

She scratched out the last line and got out of bed long enough to put her peasant blouse on the floor beside the door. The next day, she would give it to the Salvation Army. The bracelet, she would send to her sister in Texas as a present.

Even so, she lay awake for a long time before she could sleep again.

Katherine peered at the lines on her customer's palm. This woman had beautiful hands, with well-manicured nails. Compared to Katherine's, her palm was wonderfully clear: the lines were beautifully defined, expressways with highway markers and street signs to tell the way. On Katherine's palm, the lines resembled the trails left by rabbits in a meadow: faint tracks where the grass was beaten down, crossing and recrossing one another in nonsensical fashion.

Katherine followed the woman's love line and said that she would soon fall in love. The woman smiled, but Katherine tried to talk her out of it.

"I hate being in love," Katherine said. "It's like some kind of disease. It grabs you and turns your mind to jelly. Love always makes me stupid. Frankly, if I were you, I'd try to get out of it."

Katherine caught her boss watching her from the other side of the shop. He was frowning.

The woman blinked at Katherine, startled by her vehemence.

"Your heart line is strong," Katherine said, returning to the reading and dispensing with further editorial comment.

After work, she walked down Haight Street, heading up to the post office to mail the bracelet to her sister. She hated to give the bracelet up, but she knew better than to play games with fate.

As she walked past a coffee shop, she saw the man inside. He sat alone at a table, drinking coffee and reading the paper. Her eye registered the details that she did not want to know. From the way he held his coffee

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cup, she knew that he was protective and a little possessive. The angle of his newspaper revealed that he was shy, but he covered that up with outward show of sociability. He was slow to express his emotions. He was uncomfortable in his body.

She hurried past, carrying her small package as if it held a bomb.

Because she knew the future, she often started saying goodbye before she said hello. In the blank hours before she fell asleep, she rehearsed farewell speeches. She was very skilled at saying goodbye. She could toss it off as if it didn't really matter: "It's been nice." "So long." "See you around."

That night, she sent out for Chinese food. It came with two fortune cookies. The first one said: "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." The second said: "Watch your step." She burned both scraps of paper in the incense burner by her bed. The smoke from the fortunes smelled faintly of jasmine.

A dream: the dark-haired man was walking toward her, and she wanted to run away. She turned and ran, but she was running in slow motion, as if she were running through glue. She woke drenched in sweat and wrote the dream down, cursing the lack of detail.

She was working at the counter when her boss grabbed her hand and pried it open.

"You are avoiding something," he said. "But you can't avoid it much longer. The energy has to go somewhere." She was dimly aware that he was stroking her hand and smiling.

"What should I do?" she murmured, half to herself.

He grinned at her as if he had thought she would never ask. "Put yourself in my hands," he said. "I know what to do." His grip on her wrist tightened.

She pulled away and stared him down with glacial eyes.

Whenever she was upset, she walked on the beach, trying to read the messages that the waves painted on the sand. She could not read the waves, and she liked that. People were too easy. They wore their futures on their faces, out where everyone could see. She could not help but read them, whether she wanted to or not.

The sand pipers ran ahead of her, leaving footprints on the sand. The waves always washed them away, wiping the beach clean again.

She was concentrating on the waves, and she looked up just in time to see him walking toward her. He was looking out to sea, where the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sunset was smearing the clouds with color. She turned and ran, but the loose sand slowed her down.

She dreamed: she sat with him on a green park bench and held his hand. He looked at her and said "I love you," and then he kissed her. And she knew, sure as anything, that he would leave her.

She could not sleep again that night. She sat up and read the tarot cards, thinking of him. In the cards, she found heartbreak, betrayal, and pain.

It is not good to read your own cards, she reminded herself. The accuracy is suspect. She shuffled and read again. Entrapment, confusion, destruction.

Yet again: happiness, contentment, peace. Too many futures.

She shuffled repeatedly, and laid the cards out on the table, searching in the brightly colored pictures for patterns in which she could believe.

At dawn, she reluctantly went for a stroll in Golden Gate Park, where the morning sun was just beginning to burn off the fog.

She found him on a green park bench, feeding popcorn to the pigeons. They flocked around him, running after the kernels that he tossed. Their footprints in the dust made an intricate pattern of crisscrossing lines. It was impossible to tell where the prints left by one bird left off and the prints of another began. She stood for a moment and watched him.

He looked at her—a quick sidelong glance—and then returned to the pigeons before she could meet his eyes. Still he did not speak.

"What bothers me is the inevitability of it all," she said. "Is my life a paint-by-numbers? Doesn't knowing the future set me free? Apparently not."

He looked at her, bewildered. "What?"

He didn't look so dangerous. A bold pigeon climbed onto his tennis shoe and reached for the popcorn in his hand. He squinted a little because the sun was in his eyes.

"Nice morning," she said, and he nodded.

"About that reading," she said, and against her better judgment she took his hand. "Don't say it," she told him before he could open his mouth. "Just don't say it."

Then she stole a quick look at her own palm. It seemed that the heart line was a little stronger and that maybe the life line did not cross it at all.

"I still think you'll leave me," she said softly. She looked up and met his eyes. He was confused. She was doing things in the wrong order again. It wasn't time to say goodbye. Not yet.

"All right," she said. "I'll risk it."

And then, despite it all, she kissed him. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reaching for the Stars by Mark Mercury

FOR THOSE WHO STILL DARE TO DREAM

Would you like to create a new age of exploration that will last for generations to come? You'd be surprised to learn how many people don't care, or who figure that someone else is going to do it. Because, with the possible exception of the Soviet Union, world leadership today is reaching for everything but the stars!

The next time it occurs to you that you should be doing something more about space settlement, act on it! Join the National Space Society and make a visible difference that today's leaders will recognize..

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

MAIL TO

NATIONAL SPACE SOCIETY
922 Pennsylvania Ave SE Washington DC 20003

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY STATE ZIP

☐ $30 Annual Regular Dues

☐ $18 Jr/Sr (under 22/over 64)
My age is _____

(US$ only, outside the US, Canada and Mexico add $5)

You may charge your membership to:

☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

☐ American Express ☐ Discover

NUMBER EXPIRATION DATE

SIGNATURE

DEPT DV2

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

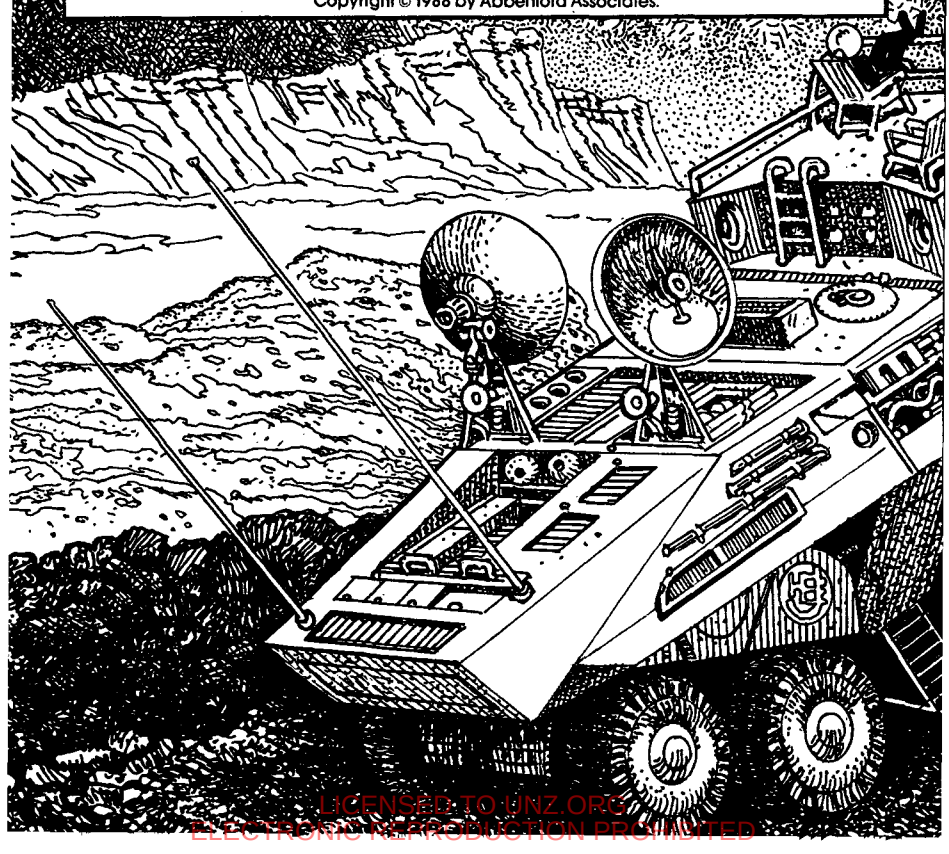
ALL THE BEER ON MARS

by Gregory Benford

art: Hank Jankus

Gregory Benford, whose last piece for *IAsfm* was "The Future of the Jovian System" (August 1987), returns to our pages with an intriguing tale of Martian exploration. Mr. Benford's latest novel, *Tides of Light* (Bantam), will be published in hardcover this February. It is a sequel to *Great Sky River,* which has just been released in paperback, and it is a part of his constellation of novels about machine intelligences.

Copyright © 1988 by Abbenford Associates.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

© CASSELL PLC 2002
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bradley Reynolds climbed into the crawler's cabin. He always had trouble closing the lock door but he got it sealed finally and ran his gloves over the lip of the collar to be sure it was lined up and smooth. Then he walked over to the work bench and sat down without saying anything. The crawler growled and surged forward.

"Beer?" Lev Stelonski asked.

"A little early in the day," Bradley said.

"Is already poured." He handed Bradley a beaker filled with amber fluid and no foam on top.

Bradley laughed. "Looks like my whole ration."

"Liter extra today."

Bradley put the beaker down carefully. The crawler rocked and some beer slopped out. It fell slowly in the low gravity but he could not catch it. Wellen, who was driving the crawler, said without looking around, "Get to it."

"You stop, we work," Lev said evenly.

"You can do the setup while we're movin'," the driver said.

"And we can spill the beer, too. Please to slow down." Lev raised his eyebrows at Bradley.

"Wait'll I get through this dry wash."

Bradley picked up his drink respectfully and caught some beer just as the crawler lurched. He was damned if he was going to let anymore spill. It would make Wellen smile and maybe say something and then they would get into an argument again. Bradley had promised himself that wouldn't happen anymore. He was senior here and should stay out of minor scrapes. The hierarchy of the expedition had loosened a lot but he should not let it go completely slack.

Out the broad windshield of the crawler he could see the canyon open up before them as they came out of the little side arroyo. Pink and brown stains in the sandy soil stretched away into the distance. This part of the great Valles Marineris complex had plenty of signs that looked like water erosion. But no water.

Wellen stopped and killed the engine. The second crawler sat in a gully up ahead waiting for them. "Okay, got it set?"

"In time," Lev said tensely.

Lev took the cylindrical sample holder from Bradley and put it into the biological diagnostic booth that ran halfway along one side of the crawler. Opposite the booth was the main equipment locker. In the back were the bunks and head and kitchen. Everything had a thin film of dust over it but nobody cared about that any longer.

Lev prepared carefully for the test. No matter how many times he did this the biologist methodically went through each step. A shortcut could mess up the whole thing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The inside of the bio booth was at Martian pressure, about one percent of an Earth atmosphere. That made the fixed gloves in the side of the booth stand out straight, as though an invisible man were trying to reach in toward the shelf of bottles and flaskware. Lev opened the sample holder using the gloves.

"Looks like same consistency as before," Lev said.

"Clay with some sand," Bradley said.

"Hard boring?" Lev spread some of the flaky soil into a receiving port. "First meter came easy."

"As before. The top layer was washed here."

"By water," Wellen said.

"Or by mud flows," Lev said automatically.

"Or blown by wind," Bradley said.

It was an old argument. Some sites looked to Wellen, the geologist, like classic river valleys. But the rutted land had been carved billions of years ago and then the atmosphere had been heavier. Earthside studies showed that a brief Eden might have flourished for a while. A Mars of streams and lakes and molecules fumbling to find each other and build something bigger. Certainly there was not much water left now and the atmosphere outside was nearly pure carbon dioxide. But most of their expedition favored the water explanation even though there was not even much permafrost left in these deep, dry chasms.

"Good beer." Bradley sipped some more, taking his time.

"I learn," Lev said proudly. "Slow but I learn."

Making beer from their food stores had been his idea. He had smuggled the yeast on the expedition and experimented with it during the eight months voyage. They recycled their water and the brewing concealed the processing tastes. It was the best possible morale booster in a world of stinging aridity.

Lev's hands moved expertly with the sample, not rushing. He divided it and put five little piles of the crumbly soil into small vials. Then he fed them one by one into the bulky gas chromatograph.

Bradley looked out the windshield at the sheer cliffs that rose in the distance. Pink dirt, pink sky. A blue-black tinge deepened the pink further up. The white dot of Deimos hung near the horizon.

As Wellen watched Lev's work his angular face was pinched with irritation. Bradley had not seen any other expression there for days.

Lev said, "Organics again."

"How much?" Wellen demanded tightly.

"Two hundred forty-three parts per billion," Lev read off the digital display.

"Huh," Wellen said. "Less than last time."

"Within the error bars of the diagnostic," Bradley said evenly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But less," Wellen said.

They had been following the concentration of organic molecules for weeks. As they came down into the great rift valley the concentration of organics slowly increased.

"What'd you see?" Bradley asked.

Lev shrugged and read off the screen. "Formate. Amino acids. Same as before."

Bradley nodded. These could easily have come from the peculiar, virulent peroxide chemistry of the soil. Like the results of the earlier unmanned Aero probe, they suggested more complex organics could form. But where?

"Look," Wellen said sharply. "We're dippin' around here. Should head straight for the valley floor."

Bradley pointedly ignored Wellen and looked at Lev. "How far down were the organics?"

"Few centimeters."

"Nothing deeper?"

"No."

"Like last time," Bradley said.

"We're following a trail that's petering out," Wellen said.

"We're being systematic," Bradley said.

Wellen said sarcastically, "I say we *systematically* head for the Herbes Chasma."

"We went over that," Bradley said. He looked levelly at Wellen for a long moment.

Wellen snorted and shook his head. Their long expedition was coming to its end and they had little to show for it. Wellen said, "Let's goddamn well get movin' then," and started the crawler engine.

Wellen sped up quickly over the dry wash. Their big tires spewed dust into a filmy curtain behind them that settled slowly. Bradley drank some more beer, telling himself he was just making sure it did not spill. He wanted to drain the beaker. Anything to get the alkaline tang out of his mouth. He knew the taste would come back though as soon as he inhaled any of the dust that had worked into everything.

Lev pulled his hands from the gloves and took his own beer flask from its wire rack.

"Like this better?" Lev asked.

"Yeah. Darker." Bradley brushed some pale dust from his black pressure suit.

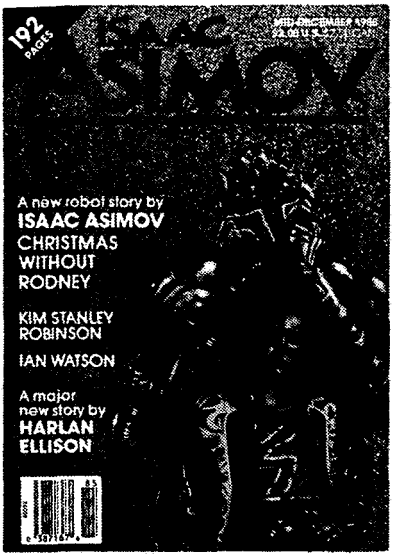
"A different yeast culture. I tried something like it at the Institute when I was a student. Bought from Austria."

"Sold it, too, I'll bet."

"Of course. Was the first good thing I got from *glasnost*."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THIS YEAR ENTER ANOTHER DIMENSION.



SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE 25% OFF THE COVER PRICE

CALL TOLL-FREE 1-800-247-2160

(Iowa residents Call 1-800-362-2860)

☐ Please send me 18 issues of ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE for only $26.97—I save 25% off the newsstand price.

☐ Please send me 8 issues for only $11.97.

Mail to: **Isaac Asimov's**
P.O. Box 1933
Marion, Ohio 43305

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

☐ Payment Enclosed ☐ Bill Me

☐ Charge (Circle one) MasterCard VISA

Card# _____

Exp. Date _____

Signature _____

OUTSIDE US & POSS., 8 for $13.97, 18 FOR $29.97 (CASH WITH ORDER US FUNDS). PLEASE ALLOW 6-8 WEEKS FOR DELIVERY OF YOUR FIRST ISSUE.

DSA9S-3

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You used the money to buy another Lenin poster?"

"No, rock records. The metal heavy kind."

"Heavy metal."

"Loud, I did not like."

"You'd have been happier with Lenin."

"No, the records, I bought them in Moscow, sold for twice the price in Kharkov."

"Admirable." Bradley cradled his beaker as they rolled over a rise and came down into a broad gully.

"Looks good here," Lev said distantly.

"Same as yesterday."

They joined the other crawler and the two churned abreast along the wide valley. Stone ramparts reared at the northern and southern horizons. They were making slow progress down a tributary that finally would neck into the deepest parts of the great Martian rift canyon. Wellen wanted them to take a short route through to Hebes Chasma. That was the last major site they could visit in the time remaining. It had a central plateau which from orbit looked like the rippled terrain left when a lake dried out. But the biologists wanted to cover a wider track.

"Funny, y'know," Bradley said in a hushed voice. "We spend thirty billion dollars and come all this way and we don't get anymore than the Aero rover did. Organic molecules and sand."

"Not funny," Lev said.

The next sample point was in a stream bed that swept out of a side arroyo and fanned into the main valley. The stark iron-dark strata here jutted up into a shimmering pink sky. Thin yellow dust moved at high altitude like lace.

Bradley took the core sample again. The work of turning the screw of the borer made him sweat. It was better that way because the work kept the piercing cold out of his arms and legs.

He wore a black sheath very much like the wet suits used in ocean diving and with his breathing mask it made him look a lot like the creature from the black lagoon. He liked the image. Mars, he had said on one of the PR 'casts to earthside, was a place suited for monsters—so he might as well look like one. In fact only hardy lifeforms like lichen and humans had any chance here. But there were certainly no lichen and probably never had been.

When he got the sample inside Lev performed his usual careful analysis. Wellen started up again and the crawler's steady purr lulled Bradley. He sat for a while and let the crawler rock him and daydreamed not about women but about going for a swim in big rollers off Australia. Lev's startled outburst made him blink awake.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You broke the seal!" Lev said.

"What? No I didn't." Bradley looked through the transparent booth canopy at the neatly arranged samples. "What's wrong?"

"It's contaminated."

"What with?"

"Small peptides. And some iron-binders, looks like."

"Um." Bradley tried to remember if he had made any slips. Those were both complex organic molecules that were present in even a small flake of skin or gob of spit.

"Let me look closer," Lev said. He moved his working capsule to the scanning electron microscope and punched in commands, studying the screen. Bradley had tracked in more dust and the acrid tang stung his nostrils. He thought about beer.

"Cells! There are cells in this."

"Huh? What level?" Bradley asked.

"First few centimeters off the top."

They looked at each other. Bradley said, "Try further down."

He sat pensively as Lev methodically tested the other small vials. Each went under the microscope and then into the gas chromatograph. A digital plate showed the organic compound concentration: 236, 248, 197, 214.

"None of the others has any cells," Lev said accusingly.

"They're only in the surface layer?"

"Yes."

"I didn't do anything different this time."

"Try again."

"Okay. Stop, John."

John Wellen was irritated to lose the time. He muttered to himself and grimaced.

Bradley took more care and got a second sample from a low, sandy spot. He walked around the area looking for unusual signs but saw nothing special.

When he got back inside Lev said, "I did some more runs on the scanning 'scope. Still look like cells. Chewed up by peroxides but cells, yes. Damage is bad but some might be refractile bodies."

"What's that?" Wellen asked.

"Spores, maybe," Bradley said cautiously.

This time Lev carefully checked the seals on the translucent sample cylinder. He took a long while making his measurements and then looked under the microscope.

"Still there," he said flatly.

"Not my fault," Bradley said evenly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wellen said sharply, "Come *on*, Reynolds. You botch up two pickups in a row—"

"What kind of cells are they?" Bradley asked Lev, ignoring Wellen.

"They have some common bacterial features," Lev said.

"I took that sample canister from the rack outside. It hasn't been in here for days."

"Should be clean, then," Lev said.

"The UV outside would zap any ordinary bacteria from us, right?" Bradley asked. He was backup bio officer but his real area of competence was astronomy and he felt a little unsure.

"Of course. But we try again."

"Hey," Wellen said, "*you* go get this one, Lev."

They moved on a few hundred meters. Lev took elaborate precautions. Wellen tapped his fingers on the dashboard of the crawler and watched the sky darken as night came on.

A long silence hung in the crawler. Lev looked up from his microscope screen.

"They are here. Cells. Not ours. Of that I am now sure."

The team from the other crawler came to the celebration that night. Lev opened more brewing bottles and they had pungent beer with their food rations.

"Here's to life on Mars," Wellen toasted the five others.

"Besides us," Lutya Karpov replied. She was the commander of the other crawler and had a solemn air even while enjoying herself.

"To us, too," Wellen said.

"To us, the highest lifeforms on Mars," Bradley answered. "Maybe."

"These cells, they live in peroxide soils," Lutya said. "They scavenge for the little drops of water mixed in the grains. *We* cannot do that."

"Don't want to," Bradley said. "That's what makes us higher lifeforms. Judgment."

Wellen asked, "How long you figure those cells been dead?"

Lev rubbed his long nose. "Could be many, many years. Dead is dead. Doesn't change much after."

"What'd Earthside say?" Wellen asked.

"They think my binding stain test of the cells is—what is your word?—'indicative.' Very cautious."

"Of what?" Bradley asked.

"Of nucleic acids," Lev said. "But is same as our DNA? We cannot tell."

"And why?" Lutya asked, sipping her beer and absently scratching. There had been no time today for even the sponge baths.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The peroxides in soil, they have degraded molecular structure. Muddied the waters, the Americans say."

"Only there's no water here," Bradley said. "I took the boring pipe as far down as it'll go."

"Cells come from elsewhere," Lutya said.

"Must," Lev said.

Lev had beamed his results up to the other five members of the expedition. They were heating the Phobos rock to extract water as reaction mass for the return voyage. They had dropped everything and run analysis on Lev's scanning electron microscope data. There were more tests Lev could do and everybody needed time to think. Better samples were more important than any amount of theory, though. Lev's data, squirted to earth on laserlink, now made every biologist alive a potential kibbitzer. Clearly, Bradley saw, all this was making Lev play his game close to the vest.

"Caution," Bradley said, clinking beakers with Lev.

Lev nodded. "Caution, much caution. Wish we had vodka. Proper toast requires vodka."

Wellen said, "Beer disguises the Martian taste better."

"Peroxide residue," Lutya said. "I wish I could find a way to take it out of our water."

"How high did you run the last batch?" Wellen asked.

"Four hundred twenty degrees Centigrade," she said precisely.

"Damn! Should do it," Wellen said.

Bradley listened to the continuing talk about Lutya's water extraction rig. The tangle of pipes and solar panels on top of the other crawler heated up the soil and got about one percent water out. The few extra liters per day were a precious addition to their meager ration. That also gave them something to talk about besides the continual problem of the smell from the john. Every other topic of discussion had long been exhausted.

"Another toast," Wellen said. "Fill your glasses."

This took a while and then he said, "To the Vikings."

"Viking, 1976," Lev said solemnly.

Bradley said, "Smart little probes. Got the chemistry right but said there were no organics here. Half credit."

Lev said, "And I propose also, to Mars One."

"Mars one what?" Wellen asked.

"First work of humankind to touch Mars. In 1971." Lev grinned.

"Doesn't count," Wellen said. "Crashed, didn't it?"

"Yes. Still, it came," Lev said.

"Good point," Bradley said. He automatically backed Lev against Wellen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Didn't *do* anything," Wellen said edgily.

Lutya lifted her beaker. "Then I propose, to Mars Three."

"Another smashup?" Wellen asked sarcastically.

"Landed fine," Lutya said. "And sent data for twenty seconds."

"Terrific," Wellen said.

Bradley asked, "How about Mars Two?"

"Lost," Lev said. "Probably missed making orbit."

"How many times you guys shoot at this place?" Wellen asked.

"Seven times," Lutya said smoothly. "But was Viking that triumphed."

She was the diplomat in the crew and knew how to soothe Wellen. They were all getting short tempered as supplies got low and they found nothing beyond the organics they had already known about before they arrived. And the increasingly anxious voices laserlinked from Earth through Phobos only irked them further.

Her job and Bradley's was to be sure none of this boiled over into outright conflict. Bradley allowed himself a moment of amused speculation. There had been some talk that she was supposed to soothe the Soviet half in more important matters but there had never been any plausible way it could have worked. There was never any time when she or Faye Nguyen, the American woman who was now up on Phobos, was alone with any of the men. Still, it was something to think about. Bradley had run through the predictable fantasies but finally had found that he preferred thinking about some women Earthside. The compacted spaces of the main module and this crawler had leached his animal spirits thoroughly. Or maybe it was the peroxides.

"How many times you hit?" Wellen asked.

"Three. Mars Six had retrorocket failure," Lutya said with a shy smile.

A low moan swept through the crawler cabin. "The old man of Mars," Lev said.

The winds came up at night here in the canyons. They moved at several hundred kilometers per hour but with the low atmospheric density there was no danger of blowing a man over. It did sound deep bass notes, though, an eerie mournful voice.

"Maybe the old man ate your probes," Wellen said.

"Did not eat Aero," Lev said.

Wellen nodded. "To Aero," he toasted.

"Without whom," Bradley agreed.

He did not like to let national antagonisms start up even in the mildest way. He and Lutya were nominally in charge but they all knew the expedition rested on a fine balance of cooperation.

The Soviets had paid the big chunk of the bill to get here. They alone had the boosters to place large masses in Martian orbit. They had sent the Aero probe lofting over the sands of Mars in the 1990s.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The design was ingenious, a sealed helium balloon with a larger *montgolfiere* below. The *montgolfiere* was a black hot air balloon open to the Martian atmosphere. With morning it absorbed solar infrared and rose, pulling the bottom payload off the ground. The two balloons rode the winds until sundown, when the *montgolfiere* deflated, lowering the detection package to the surface where it could process more soil samples.

Aero had made seven such touchdowns before a duststorm punctured it on a cliffside. It found organic molecules at two sites. The soil chemistry showed tantalizing hints of biochemical processes at work. Ambiguous, but far more promising than the Viking results of the 70s. And that had been enough to inspire a manned expedition.

Appropriately, Aero was conceived by the French, the pioneers of balloon flights a century before. The Soviets helped build Aero and flew it to Mars, beginning joint national explorations. Now came the big gamble, the manned expedition. A gamble that wasn't paying off.

"The past," Lev said solemnly, "conditions the present. May our great countries find the end of our conflicts, on the sands of a world named for war." They all nodded. Periodically the Soviets solemnly invoked *mir*, peace, as the underlying reason for this expedition. Bradley knew he had to pay the proper respects. He had spent two decades helping NASA pull itself out of its long slump and this was the biggest event of his generation. Without the Soviets it could not have happened. Still, he didn't give a damn about politics. Or about international relations or peace or providing the right symbolism for the laserlink appetite. He wanted to find life here. Period.

"*Mir* and *svoboda*," he said.

Lev smiled at the little joke. "*Svoboda* means freedom."

Bradley grinned and spread his hands expansively. "Here, comrades, we are free to find what we can."

"And find it quick," Wellen said.

"Someday this'll be Martian Arches National Monument," Bradley said.

"For tourists?" Lev stopped beside Bradley and reconsidered the stunning sight.

"Sure. Life corrupts everything."

Across the broad stream bed swept eight thin stone arches. They were volcanic tubes, Wellen said, black and crusted.

A hundred meters long, impossibly spindly, like a sketch of a proposed bridge. The soaring black lines stood starkly against the ruddy landscape. The same light gravity that had permitted this gossamer stretch of stone let Bradley skip easily down the slope. He jumped but could not reach the lowest black arch.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Walk up it," Lev called. "Like a bridge."

Bradley shook his head. "I shouldn't have tried. What if my weight breaks it?"

"They are nearly four billion years old," Lev said. "They have withstood more than a boot."

"Four billion?"

"So Wellen says."

Bradley looked over the soft pinks and mottled greys of the wide valley. They could not see the canyon ramparts now. The valley was hundreds of kilometers wide, a lowland refuge from the pervasive bleached aridity. The great cut that wrapped around a third of the planet had sections three times deeper than the American Grand Canyon. Yet it was vastly ancient and had stood this way for nearly as long as life had crawled on Earth. "Even more reason not to break them." He said.

Lev said, "And more the reason to find what lived here then."

"How about those micromats you found?"

Lev shrugged. "Microbial fossils, I thought. Now I am not so sure."

"Take more samples."

"That is not problem. Hard to tell if mat is trace of fossil life. Could be merely meaningless blob inside rocks. Too many chemical events can mimic the biological."

"But if they *are* . . . "

"Yes. Ancient life. But mats are hard to identify even on earth, where we *know* there was life. Such studies take time."

"Only got two days till pickup."

Lev sighed. "All the cells we have found are dead. Perhaps they came from a watery zone."

"From the poles?"

"I hope not." They were all tired from the incessant moving. Bradley had driven all night. The density of small cells increased slowly as they approached Hebes Chasma. Most were windblown, Lev and Lutya had decided. From where?

"Still not much permafrost around here," Bradley said. "Maybe Chasma's got more."

"An oasis?" Lev looked up at the dark bowl of sky rimmed by pink.

"The cells couldn't live here anyway, you said."

"Yes. Too high a peroxide content to these soils. And it is difficult to test their age. They cannot be as old as these arches, however."

"Even so—"

"Yes. Even so, life on Mars. Hooray. But when?"

They came down the wide wash into Hebes Chasma on the last day. The mission had been planned with some slack in it but that was all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gone now. The pickup rocket would have to land here within hours.

It was not a bad site. The grand Valles Marineris walls were hundreds of kilometers away, no threat to the lander's navigation. The sandy banks were rippled and undulating. Morning frost gave a light white touch to some ruddy rocks. It would evaporate within an hour.

Soil water content was higher here, but still more arid than the driest site on Earth, the valleys of Antarctica. Bradley reminded himself that some of the early Viking detectors had registered nothing living when the Americans tried them out in Antarctica. It had been years later that biologists found bacteria and algae thriving there in the moist, minute spaces between mineral grains, deep inside rocks.

"Almost like Siberia," Lev said beside him.

They rode in the roof chairs atop the crawler. They faced an eight month voyage in a capsule now and wanted openness.

"Colder."

"Yes. But even in Siberia, believe it or not, we have human beings."

The crawler swayed as Wellen drove forward at top speed. Bradley said, "But many do not wish to be there."

Lev laughed. "That was the old Soviet Union."

"What was that you said a couple days back? 'The past conditions the present,' I believe."

"I can tell you for sure we will not turn Mars into a prison colony."

"I wish I could promise we won't let tourists carve their initials into those arches."

"Still you will try."

"Yes."

"We have a treaty, then."

"Agreed. No tourists, no prisons."

Lev hugged his coat tighter over his pressure suit. The crawler's speed brought biting cold. "Very solemn treaty."

"Deserves a beer."

"Indeed. I suggest we drink our reserve well before the lander crew comes."

"Very wise."

"Another historic agreement?"

"Yeah, the First Martian Beer Protocols."

"We are being diplomatically, silly."

"Of course. All diplomats are."

Bradley knew how to read Lev's tension in the little jokes, the tightened voice. The cell count was rising rapidly as they lumbered through the rolling plains. Each halt brought a higher count. But the cells were still dead. Outcasts from some primordial Eden.

If there were some oasis where primordial Martian life clung to a last

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vestige of moist wealth, it had to be near here. Winds had scattered it far down the great valleys. Cold and ultraviolet had killed the cells as they blew in the thin, hard gales.

Phobos came up fast in the west. Its pinhead disk swept visibly through the pink rim and into the dark center of the sky. It seemed to be rushing.

On its next pass the lander would detach. The lander's tanks were filled with water harvested by cooking the grainy Phobos rock. They were clinging to the land here, stealing from the scanty Martian reserves of moisture. Life had to, whether cells or humans.

Lev said distantly, "Phobos means fear, yes?"

"Think so."

"And Deimos?" He gestured at the starlike point, brighter than Venus.

"Demon? No, terror."

"Attendants to the god of war."

"Fearsome names," Bradley said.

"A fearsome and deadly place."

"Maybe we should rename Mars."

"To what?"

"How 'bout *Mir*?"

Lev chuckled. Bradley kept surveying the landscape that lurched past. They might be able to spot something from up here. Algae, discolored soil. He watched and gave Lev time to come out with it.

"The final laserlink report is in," Lev said.

"Uh huh." Bradley watched the horizon.

"The cellular structure is in line with evolutionary theory."

"Which means?"

"Simple structures. Same principles of morphological function."

"Seems reasonable."

"Without the samples themselves they cannot tell much, of course."

"Wish we had a DNA reader." They had carried one on the landing at the south pole. There was more permafrost there but no organic compounds at all. To range further in the crawlers they had cut their weight and left the bulky DNA reader. There was a backup on Phobos.

Lev said, "I think the underlying structure will be very different. I am eager to look more deeply."

"Wish we had more equipment. And time."

"These cells, they must have adapted to arid and peroxide-rich soils. They must use very different metabolic pathways, be very UV resistant."

"Let's hope there're some still alive up ahead."

"There are faint similarities, I believe, to *Bacillus subtilis*. That is a spore-forming bacterium found in soils."

"Not surprising. Evolution forces similar adaptations."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It is good news in a way."

"How come?"

"Such cells imply significant development in at least a rudimentary biosphere. They are rather more advanced than theory supposes the very first life would be."

"That's the clay theory, right?" Bradley shaded his eyes against the sun's hard glare. There was a blue-gray hill to the right that looked unusual. Algae? He held his breath for a long moment.

Then as they approached he saw it was a trick of the lighting. With no ozone layer Mars let through all the ultraviolet and the hard blues played with colors. Their pressure masks had UV filters to protect their eyes. The dead cells could have used such help. Maybe there were caves with natural aquifers that sheltered them up ahead, though.

Lev shrugged. "Elementary self-replicating crystals might have begun in clays, yes. A theory appropriate for Mars, perhaps."

Wellen's voice broke in on radio. "Touchdown's in seven hours, guys. I'm gonna gun this up faster."

"Go ahead," Bradley answered. Wellen had never taken orders from him well but now they all agreed. Their final goal was the deepest part of Hebes Chasma, over a hundred kilometers ahead. Permafrost was probably closest to the surface there. Atmospheric pressure was higher. The lander would come down there, right in the middle of what they all hoped would be the oasis.

"Something." Lev pointed.

It was a long way off. Darker soil and a slight bump.

"Go left," Bradley told Wellen over radio. "See it?"

"No." The crawler turned.

"More left."

"Gotcha."

"Careful."

They lumbered down a gully and across a flat wash of gravel. The mound ahead was a few meters high and the soil nearby was light brown. They came up on it fast.

Lev got down first and approached the stained ground. The patch was about as big as a soccer field. Lev stooped to take a sample.

Bradley kept walking. His boots came down on the stuff and made deep prints into the tan sand below.

"No! Stop!" Lev shouted.

Bradley kept going without any clear idea why. Life. He wanted to see it, to touch it. Life. The alien. He was breathing hard.

"You contaminate it!" Lev shouted. He started toward Bradley but halted at the edge of the stain. "Come back!"

"No . . . no." Bradley's throat was tight and he could not get more out.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The mound was about a third of the way into the stained area. The brown color was deeper there, the deepest of all.

"That is most probably the aquifer," Lev called over radio.

"Yeah," Bradley said numbly.

"A water source. That is what we sought."

"Maybe."

Bradley reached the mound and kicked at it.

"My God, Bradley! Leave it alone!"

"We haven't got time."

"No! Don't disturb the layers!"

His boot hit something hard. He kicked again and heard a metallic clank.

Wellen called, "Bradley, what in hell are—"

He got down on his knees and pushed away the sand.

There was a smashed cylindrical body with lots of struts and bolts around it. Oxidants in the soil had rusted the thin metal.

There was a date in Roman numerals: 1971.

Bradley looked up into the dark sky and saw a single wisp of cloud. He sighed and gazed down at the garden of Eden rusting in the dust.

Lev came to a halt beside him. Wellen was shouting something but Bradley did not answer. Plenty of time to talk later. Eight months of talk.

He jumped on the thing. Lev had brushed more soil away and Bradley kicked hard at the struts. The metal split and the little lander legs bent.

Nobody said anything. Bradley kicked it a last time and stepped back puffing.

"What's the Cyrillic script say?" he asked at last.

"Mars One"

"*Bacillus subtilis*, huh?"

"In the early days of our program . . . "

"Yeah?"

"There was a common assumption. That the passage through the interplanetary medium would sterilize the probe further." Lev's face was pale and etched by deep lines.

"In case your lab sterilization didn't get everything?"

"Yes. In the loading, the waiting on the pad, there are opportunities, however small, for a leak."

"Yeah." Bradley made himself breathe normally.

"And we hurried."

"To get here."

"Yes."

"You made it all right."

"An error."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wellen said, "Your goddamn carelessness!"

"It was . . . a different time."

Wellen shoved Lev aside. "All this wasted! Come so far, and *you* messed it up before we even had a, had a *chance*—"

Bradley grabbed Wellen's shoulder and gently pushed him away from Lev. "He's right. It was a different time."

Wellen's eyes were big. "But, but they—"

"Listen to me," Bradley said. "It was a human kind of error. That—"

"Yeah, *their* goddamn mistake." Wellen shoved Lev again. "We oughta—"

Bradley stepped between them. "And *humans* made the error. *Humanity* made it. That's all that counts now."

Wellen stared at Bradley and Lev for a long moment, breathing hard, his mouth compressed. "Damn!" He kicked the probe savagely. "Damn!" He glared at them again and then whirled and stalked off, his gloved hands knotted.

Silence. Just the wind brushing them with its small dead voice.

Bradley said, "Well, you were first all right. You were first."

Lev could not take his eyes off the battered metal. He was dazed.

"Let's go," Bradley said.

"What?"

"Let's go inside. Samples we can take later."

"Well, I . . . "

"No, no, my friend. Come inside."

"For . . . why?"

"A toast. We will drink a toast to Mars One."

Lev said carefully, "All right."

"You said it before. The past conditions the present."

"We have to be sure . . . this incident . . . "

"The past isn't everything. It's just prologue."

"I hope . . . "

"Sure. Sure."

"Bradley—"

"Come on."

"We . . . we will never *know* now. Not for certain."

"Yeah."

"The others. Mars Three, perhaps more. The entire planet could be contaminated."

"Yeah. Even if there are fossil mats left, this'll disguise them."

"My . . . I . . . "

"Come on. We'll drink up all the beer on Mars." ●

—for Mark Martin

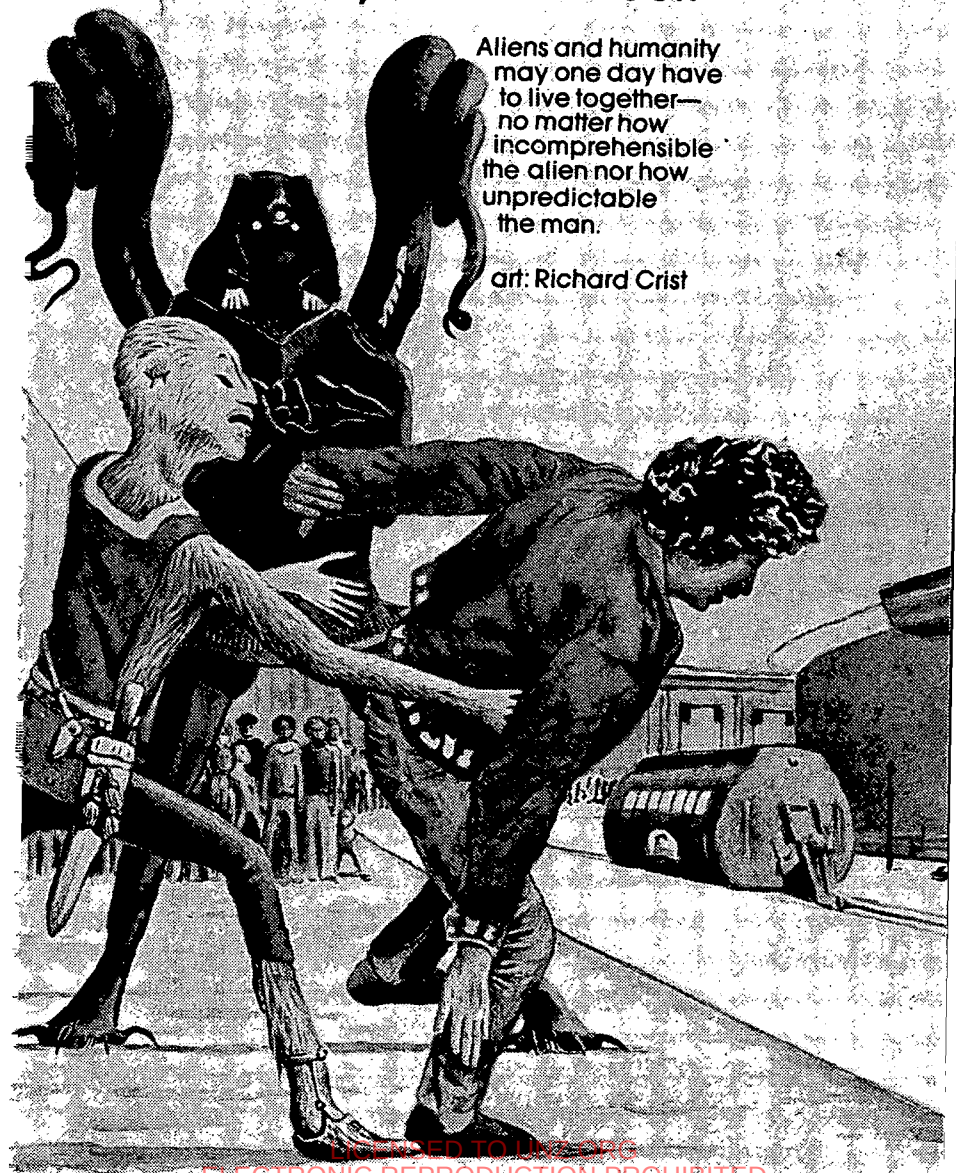
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IRIDESCENCE

by Dean Whitlock

Aliens and humanity may one day have to live together— no matter how incomprehensible the alien nor how unpredictable the man.

art: Richard Crist



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was a soap bubble, simple as that. It hovered for a minute over the heads of the crowd, lifted, and then popped in a tiny rain of shiny drops. Someone laughed, a sudden, happy sound. I went closer.

Another bubble rose over their heads. I watched colors swirl over the surface, a rainbow, mostly green, iridescent in the workday glow of the ceiling. Then it popped, too. I heard water plop on the sidewalk. And more laughter. I had spent the day wandering from level to level, up and down the lifts and the lanes of the city, with no more purpose than a vague sense of looking. I saw little and remembered less. Only the bubbles reached me.

I looked between the gathered heads to see the magician who turned soap and water into laughter. I saw a Lyrin, strange enough sight on a crowded street, stranger still making magic at the center of the crowd. He was thin and graceful, taut in his fine white fur. He dipped the end of a clear tube into liquid, lifted it to his broad lips, and blew out another bubble, big as my fist. It rested briefly over his other palm. Then, quickly, gently, he put down the tube, dipped the end of one long finger into a dish of dye, and spotted the bubble with color.

A light touch, here and here, and blue swirled across the curve. He drew away his lower hand, and the bubble rose. Lines of blue washed around the sphere, drawing out the swirling lines of film that made it whole. Drawing out my breath. The pattern changed, shifted. And the bubble popped. Tiny drops splashed my forehead. I laughed with the others.

The crowd was mostly human, mostly young, clerks and techs on their way home at the end of day shift. They made a tight ring at the outer edge of the sidewalk, three deep, with the Lyrin in the center. A small group of Darniers stood to his left, chittering quietly as he picked up his tube and dipped it into the pan of soapy water. Yesterday, I would have had to break it up. Today, I craned for a better look.

Walkers pushed by behind me, forced to skirt the center rail. In the well, local shuttles glided past, crowded with tired faces. Expresses skimmed along the ceiling. People came and went from the shops and offices in the outer wall. The tunnel echoed with footsteps, tapping claws, and mumbled voices. Only our circle was still.

He blew the bubble and caught it on—no, *above* his palm. It hung there, turning slowly. He dipped more color, touched it to the surface. Green and blue. They swirled, melded. He drew his hand away, and the bubble hung before his face. I watched his eyes as he watched the colors swirl. He smiled at what he had crafted, a wide smile. I had never seen a Lyrin smile. Then his eyes brightened. I looked at the bubble as the swirls came to equilibrium. A moment of balance. Perfection? No. But the best I had seen that day and longer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The crowd was silent, awed, and the Lyrin with them. That was when I first thought him an artist. When he shared our awe.

Then the bubble popped, and half of us gasped. The Darniers clicked in dismay. But the Lyrin laughed, laughed at the sheer joy of that moment, and I laughed with him. I had gone a little mad that morning. There was an edge to my laughter. The Lyrin looked past the others and found my eyes. He smiled again and made a little bow. Maybe he was mad, too. I bowed back. He dotted the next one red and blue and sent it over my head.

The crowd shifted as people joined and left the circle. Painted bubbles rose and popped above them. I stayed as the light faded to evenglow, slowly moving inward till I stood before the Lyrin across the ring.

Dots of color spotted his smooth fur. The six fingertips of his right hand were stained, each a different color. The long guard hairs there were carefully plucked and shaped to fine brushes. His other hand was dry and white. I watched as he held the bubbles a small space above his palm and wondered. He studied each one as it came off the tube, his wide, thin eyes all pupil, jet against the fur. He frowned, grimaced, smiled that wide smile, laughed with delight as he chose his colors and his points on the curve. He said nothing. He asked nothing. People dropped coins on the sidewalk before him, but he didn't seem to notice.

There was a stir to my left, but I ignored it, caught in his spell. The Lyrin was lifting his finger to paint, and I was watching closely. His fingertip brushed the sphere. And suddenly the bubble shattered. Red dye streaked his palm. For a moment, I thought it was blood. Then I remembered the crack and the dark coil that had whipped above his palm just as he touched the bubble. The Lyrin met my eyes again, then glanced left. I looked.

A Shivite stood at the inner edge of the ring. Its tool arms were crossed on its broad thorax. Its whip arms spiraled back above its head to curve along the gloss-black plates of its carapace. It seemed at ease, head cocked, leg arms spread in a balanced stance, towering black above the watchers. Its sighted eyes were blank, chelae still. Only the third eye seemed to watch. The crowd gave it room.

The Lyrin nodded to it slightly, then lifted his tube and blew another bubble.

Crack! A whip arm struck across the ring, the right arm. Water sprayed the people standing near the Lyrin. They moved back. The little Darniers faded into the crowd. The Lyrin stood still a minute, smile frozen on his broad lips. Then he dipped his tube, blew another bubble.

The right whip struck out. The bubble disintegrated. The Lyrin blew another. The Shivite broke it. And again. And again. And again.

The crowd thinned. The circle shifted as people drew away from the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shivite and its whip. The Lyrin blew another bubble. The Shivite whip scattered rain across his face. No one seemed to move, but the circle was suddenly wider. Only three figures held their places—the Lyrin, the Shivite, and me.

The Lyrin was quick and lithe. He wore a knife, sheathed on his right thigh. But he was a Lyrin, for all his art and magic. He smiled patiently and blew another bubble. The Shivite had its own patience. He broke it as it left the tube. I had lost my patience long before. I stepped between them and turned to face the Shivite.

And in that moment, I remembered who I was. Or who I no longer was. I had no uniform. No badge, no weapon, no authority. No longer. I faced the Shivite boldly and felt naked.

"Human," the Lyrin said behind me. "Please . . . "

But the Shivite turned its sighted eyes on me. The facets bent light and shone with dark rainbows. The third eye hung between them, red and seeking, iridescent.

"Human . . . ," the Lyrin said again.

Then the Shivite struck.

There is a way to fight them barehanded. I've seen it done. But I had trained with a stick. A nightstick, a crop, even a cane would do. Something to catch the curling tip of the left whip. Something to deflect the sting.

I beat the blunt right whip aside with the edge of my hand and turned sideways. The left whip flicked the air where my shoulder had been. I glimpsed the hollow point of the stinger, sliding in its sheath below the tip. Then the arms coiled back, to hang like dark wings above its head. It stood silently, balanced.

Then it struck again. I ducked right, under the sting. But the other whip hit my arm. I staggered, crouching. The whips coiled, and struck again. I rolled back and came up with both arms swinging out. The right whip glanced aside. The other slid along my sleeve, parting threads, then drew back. I shifted my stance, centering, ready.

Then I felt the burning, saw the tiny welt on the back of my hand. Pain shot up my arm as the poison spread. The joints locked, then went limp. I stumbled, vision blurring. The Shivite stood over me, whips coiled, eyes glowing as the light faded in mine. My entire body began to burn. I fell forward, but hands caught me from behind.

The last thing I heard was "Human."

I came awake once in a dark place. Two eyes shone above me, and I struggled. But they were black, not green. Smooth, not jewelled.

A voice I knew said, "He wakes."

Another voice spoke and something hard pressed my lips.

"Drink," he said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I did, and choked, my throat tight and burning. But I drank again, and fell asleep.

The next time I woke, there was light. Dim light in a small, low room. I lay on a padded bench under a thin blanket. I looked around at two chairs and a table, a bed, a doorway. The Lyrin stood at a counter, slicing vegetables with his long knife.

He heard me move and looked up.

"He wakes," he said, and I recognized the voice. No one answered him this time. We were alone. He rinsed his knife, wiped it carefully, and sheathed it on his thigh. Then he carried a cup over to my bed.

"Drink," he said.

"What is it?" I could barely speak.

"Tonic," he said. "From a human doctor."

I drank. The first sip burned my throat again, but the second went down smoothly, and the third and fourth finished it.

"More?" he asked.

I nodded and he went to the counter and filled the cup. He came back with thin slices of vegetable and a cheese.

"This is all right?" he asked.

I didn't know. I drank more tonic and tried the vegetable. It went down and stayed.

The Lyrin smiled. He drew his knife and deftly sliced the cheese, then sheathed the blade again. Something in the action struck me funny. It was a potent tool to use in the kitchen. Most Lyrins wore one, but I'd never seen one drawn. I'd never seen a Lyrin smile before, either. I laughed weakly, a thin sound, given my throat and the state of my head.

The Lyrin looked startled, and then laughed himself.

"He's better," he said. "Laughter cures, yes?"

"Yes," I said. I lay back, cradling the cup on my chest. "Laughter cures." I smiled again to show I meant it, even though the room was slowly turning around me at the moment.

"Where is this?" I asked. I closed my eyes, and the room stopped moving. But then I started moving in it.

"This is home," he said.

Yes, I thought, home. Where is home? I tried to say it out loud—where is . . . But the swirling took me away.

I woke up several more times, drank more tonic, ate enough to stay alive. I found out that home was Sublevel Nine, Ring Twelve East, Donner Lane, 40. Low rent, subsidized, one room, one door. My old home had two rooms and a skylight. But my old home was on Sub Three. This was good enough, now.

On the day that I woke up hungry, I thought to ask his name. He was sitting at the table, mixing dyes in small jars, but he put that aside to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bring me more tonic and offer food. I downed every slice as soon as he could cut it, until we both laughed at my appetite.

"Wait," he said, rising. He rummaged in the cupboard, found a real paring knife, and brought it back. He presented me with both knife and cheese, then helped me sit upright on the bench. He sat beside me as I stuffed the cheese into my mouth, holding the cup where I could reach it easily. When the worst of the craving had passed, I thought about his name.

He bowed, a formal greeting. It was a Lyrin gesture, but again the action struck me. He had fed me like a baby, wiped my face, mopped up my urine. Suddenly, when it came to names, he was formal, Lyrin.

"This one is Ayer," he said solemnly.

"Ayer," I repeated, trying to voice the y and roll the r as he had. He bowed again, then waited.

"Jensin Lord," I said. I realized this was a ceremony for him, this trading names. I kept my voice grave, and bowed.

"Jensin Lord," he repeated. He softened the j, but it sounded fine. "This one is Jensin Lord." Then he smiled again, became himself. "It is a long name," he said.

I smiled back.

"Jensin is enough," I said.

He nodded. "Jensin. Jensin."

"Ayer."

Suddenly, he touched my right hand, a soft touch with just the stained tips of his fingers. But the welt was still there, still sore. I jerked back. He frowned.

"This Jensin is foolish," he said.

The way he said it made me blush.

"This Jensin is stupid," I said.

"Why?"

"Why stupid?" I asked.

He nodded. "Why make a fight?"

"Habit, I guess. I'm used to fighting for the little guy." He looked puzzled. "You," I said, pointing. "This one. Ayer. He cannot fight a Shivite."

"This Jensin can?" I couldn't read his expression, but I guessed he knew sarcasm. I shrugged.

"Six hours earlier, I could have," I said. "I forgot I had quit the force."

"This one, he is a peace officer." Ayer nodded, as if it answered some question.

"Was," I told him. "Was. I quit that morning. So they couldn't fire me."

"Fire?"

"Let go. Made to leave."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why should they?" They were direct, Lyrins. He hadn't shed that.

I thought about it. Why, indeed? Because I had tried reason when I should have used force. Because I had drawn my weapon when I should have tried reason. I had let people get hurt. I had shot first, thought later. Suddenly, after fifteen years, it all came down to kill or be killed. Or both.

"Impaired judgment," I said finally. "Loss of perspective. They'd call it something like that. I call it brain rot. Occupational insanity. Something small crawled in my ear and ate out my sense of balance." I took a deep breath. The room was spinning again. I settled back onto the pillow.

"What can I say?" I looked at the Lyrin, looked away. I couldn't read his thin black eyes. "I forgot how to do my job."

"So he fights with a Shivite." He laughed again, not unkindly. "That is, yes, loss of balance."

"You would have discussed things with it, I suppose."

"Talk with a Shivite? Who can think like a Shivite? No. It would have gone away, maybe."

"And if it didn't?"

"Ayer would go away."

That was Lyrin. "What were you doing there?" I asked.

"Painting." He didn't elaborate.

"I've never seen that done before," I said. "Is that something you do, your people?"

His eyes narrowed. "No. This is Ayer's, this painting."

"How come you're here? Why did you leave Lyra?"

He considered, then smiled. "Loss of balance," he said. "More food? Different food?"

I'm not sure I understood, any more than I understood the Shivite. He was right about that, at least—you can't talk to a Shivite. Or trust it to follow any human logic. Sometimes, you can face one down. Or maybe it just decides to do something else. Who can say? Lyrin at least are predictable. Even Ayer. They just bow and go away.

I was two weeks healing, and I counted myself lucky. Ayer never suggested I go to a hospital, and I never brought it up. I didn't question his kindness and didn't want to lose it. I had been living for a long time in a constant state of anger. His room was a haven, disorienting in its tranquility, but safe.

Once I could feed myself, he began to go out again, a few hours each day. He packed up his dyes and tube, a bottle of soapy water, a pan, all slung over his shoulder in a small box with scissored legs that opened into a stand. He came back spotted with color, with a jar full of loose change and small bills.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the first day I could walk without swaying, I went out with him. Donner Lane took foot traffic only, a dark, narrow tunnel lined with doorways and never lit brighter than evenglow. I doubted many humans lived there. Certainly, no Lyrins. Ayer led me North and East and round the compass through a maze of dim narrow lanes and finally North again to a radial lane, where the light brightened to workday and there was a lift. We went up to Sub Six and caught an inbound local to Ring Three. It was a section of shops and offices similar to the neighborhood where I'd first found him, but halfway around the ring. I was weak and sweating by the time we got there.

Ayer found a place between two doorways and set up his stand. I sat back against the wall beside him and watched as a few curious shoppers paused to see what he was selling. When the first bubble lifted off his hand, the crowd grew. He held them for an hour, I guess, painting his brief creations, making them laugh or sigh at each shimmering globe. I laughed with them at the lively ones, sighed at the beauties, each an individual. And I watched them hover over Ayer's palm, watched his fingers paint without breaking the film, and wondered again.

Then a dark movement at the edge of the crowd caught my eye. The circle parted and a Shivite stepped forward. Its bright eyes caught mine a moment, then turned back to Ayer. It waited, tool arms crossed, whips coiled. Sweat chilled on my face.

Ayer lowered the tube from his lips, laughter gone now. He looked back at me, as if to see what I would do if he blew another bubble. I don't think either of us doubted what the Shivite would do. I shrugged. There was nothing I could do, except sit against the wall and sweat. I was still weak, and no longer so foolish. But I felt the old anger settle on me, the madness.

Ayer must have seen that. He put the tube aside and capped his jars. The crowd dispersed, as though glad there was nothing still to see. They gave the Shivite a wide berth. It stood there, three eyes watching, as Ayer closed up his stand and helped me rise. I felt them shimmer against my back as we turned and walked away.

The ride back seemed endless. My legs shook, from weakness and reaction. Blood whined in my ears. My vision narrowed to the small space before my feet. Then we were walking and the light dimmed and we entered the warren he called home. And finally we walked into Donner Lane, and I stopped wondering if Ayer would have to carry me. We were two steps from his door when someone spoke.

"Spare change?"

I lifted my head and forced myself to see.

The boy was thin and lank, with a scattering of beard. His eyes were dark and wet, his voice thick. He kept his hands in his pockets and peered

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

up from hunched shoulders. He looked too pitiful to be dangerous, like me.

"Spare change?" he said again when we stopped. I leaned against the tunnel wall, wishing him gone. But Ayer set down his case and reached inside for the jar of coins. Then I heard footsteps behind us. I turned, and saw thin boy had friends.

"I'll take that, Furry," one said. There were just two of them, but that made them one more than us. They were both human, both male. Their eyes shone like thin boy's, as if there was too much light. They were dark and hungry. The speaker eyed me once and decided I was easy. He stuck out his hand.

"The jar, Furry," he said. "I'll take it."

Ayer straightened slowly and bowed. He held out the jar, set it gently in the boy's hand. Thin boy came around to join his friends. The leader shook the jar and smiled.

"Thanks, Furry," he said. "That was real kind."

I watched them turn, raging at my shaking legs. Without thinking, I pushed off the wall and took one staggering step after them, reaching. But Ayer grabbed my shoulder and held me. I pulled against him, then realized my weakness and let him drag me back through his doorway.

I sank on the bench, fists clenched. He set his case on the table and opened it, took out the dyes and water.

"You could have stopped them," I said.

He added more color to the jars, replenished the soap solution.

"They were bluffing," I said, "play-acting. You could have stopped them cold."

"No," he said, but I didn't stop for an answer.

"They were half-starved sublife," I said, ranting now. "Empty handed. You could have drawn that damn knife and scared them off. Hell, you could have just touched the handle."

Ayer looked up at me. His eyes were narrowed, black lines.

"This one cannot use the knife," he said.

"Well then why the hell don't you leave it in the kitchen? What good is it if you can't use it?"

His right hand flashed to his thigh. The knife shimmered toward me, struck the wall beside my ear. Stuck there, ringing.

"This Jensin does not understand," Ayer said. "Can, but will not."

I pulled the knife from the wall. The edge was sharp, the balance perfect.

"Then why do you carry it?" I asked. I had stopped shouting.

He came to me, hand out, and I placed the handle in his palm. He sheathed the knife and went back to the table.

"To remember," he said. "It is there *not* to be drawn."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I closed my eyes and sank back on the bench. He made it sound easy. Too easy. I remembered the days I carried my own weapon and tried not to use it. And the days when I didn't give a damn.

"Jensin."

I opened my eyes. A bubble floated before them, cradled on Ayer's palm. He dabbed on colors, two, then three. His light touch made hollows in the film. The bubble bounced lightly, oval, then round, then oval. I couldn't help but smile. Then it popped, spattering my face.

"How do you do that?" I asked. "How do you make it stay there and not pop?"

"The wetness," he said. "Look, Jensin."

He blew a large bubble, as big as my head. Then he dipped his whole hand into the soap solution. He pressed it against the bubble, and it went through the film. He wore the bubble like a glove.

"No magic," he said. "Physics."

He pulled his hand out.

"But that," I said, pointing. "It floats above your hand. How do you do that?"

"Ah," he said, nodding. He lifted his hand gently, sent the bubble floating across the room. The film wavered just before it popped. Then he blew another, smaller, and caught it deftly in the air over his palm. "This is different," he agreed. "This one might call magic."

For a moment, I believed him. Lyrins don't know humor. But this was Ayer.

"How do you do it?" I asked. "Is it levitation? What?"

"Levitation." He considered. "The bubble is made of water film," he said. "Around the bubble is thought film. The bubble is flown, the thought is formed. The thought rests on the hand. The bubble in a bubble. This is levitation?"

He drew his hand away and let the bubble sink to the floor. It shimmered a moment, a dome. Then popped.

"This is levitation," I said.

As simple as that. Blow a thought around a bubble. The armed forces of two dozen worlds would kill to have Ayer in their hands.

"Can you do this to other things?" I asked.

"People? Star ships?" He laughed. "This Jensin, he can lift a mountain?"

So. I felt relieved. "Ayer," I said. "If anyone else ever asks you, tell them it's a trick. Tell them it's all done with mirrors."

He smiled and bowed. "This one knows, Friend."

His trust made me feel a dozen years healthier.

"Now," I said, "can you teach me?"

Yes and no, it turned out. He could show me. He could let me blow the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bubbles and wield the dyes on tiny brushes made from his own fur. But he held the bubbles. First I held my hand below his, trying to sense . . . what? Something of the force that he shaped around the bubble. Then I held my hand above his, the bubbles riding a breath above my palm.

And after a while, I gave up. I stopped trying to grip each bubble in some kind of mental fist, stopped trying to float it on a cushion of thought. Because the real bubbles distracted me. The shining film caught my attention, held my eyes. I became aware of the patterns in the film, and how dyes could float on those patterns to make them whole. Or not. Many I made were flawed, but even they were beautiful. Ayer made suggestions, praised the ones that worked. I studied each as he drew his hand away and it floated free in the moments before it popped. And tried to make the next more perfect. Sometimes, I succeeded.

But once, I grabbed Ayer's hand when he started to move it away. "No," I told him. "One second more."

I reached for a different brush. But he moved his hand anyway, and the bubble soared. I chased it, vainly tried to touch on one more drop of color. It broke against the wall.

"Damn it!" I shouted. "It wasn't done."

He looked at me, pupils dilated to jet. Then he blew another bubble and held it patiently on his hand. I watched the film, saw a pattern, touched color here and there. Then again as the pattern changed. Then again as Ayer held his hand rock still beneath it. And stopped with my brush poised. Still Ayer held the bubble over his hand. But the colors grayed. The film blanched and went dull, like an eye open in death.

I drew back. And then Ayer moved his hand and let the bubble pop. The film poured in on itself and tumbled to the floor at my feet. I watched it fall, then looked up at Ayer.

"Each has a life," he said, "no shorter, no longer. That is most of the magic." I frowned, feeling stupid. "This Jensin, he knows the Shivite, yes?"

The memory made my hand ache. "Yes," I said.

"Remember the Shivite. Now, this one must eat."

Together we cleaned up the bottles and dyes, then made a meal. Ayer cooked a stew this time, deftly slicing ingredients with his knife. He talked about the dyes he used, the best places to set up the stand, which audiences left more money, which gave more laughter. I listened and helped, my eyes filled with iridescence.

We went out again the next day, to a spot near a park, where people could linger and enjoy his art. I watched avidly, seeing how he chose his points, which colors he used. But the Shivite came, and we packed up the dyes and left.

That night, I painted again while Ayer patiently held the bubbles. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

insisted I blow them, and hold my hand above his, so the bubbles appeared to float over my palm.

"This will come," he said. "For now, pretend."

So I pretended until my eyes were tired and my breath ragged. And the next day we went back out, and Ayer let me paint before the crowd. Two times only, but they were good. I'd have done more, but the Shivite found us again.

I looked back as we walked away, and felt the old anger. My fists clenched, despite me. But Ayer walked calmly beside me and I matched his stride. I thought of bubbles floating in the air above my hand and kept walking away. It was not easy.

It was harder the next day, when the Shivite came and the crowd scattered, and the next, when we hadn't even set up the stand.

"What does he want with us?" I asked Ayer.

"Who can think like a Shivite?" he said. "Who can say this one is even the same?"

It was the same, I was sure of that. But he was right about the thinking. I tried to put it from my mind, to adopt Ayer's calm. I thought about bubbles. Bubbles within bubbles.

The next day, the Shivite was waiting for us at the lift station. It followed us into the lift and onto the shuttle, trailed us along the street and stood watching when we reached the spot Ayer had chosen. It stood back a tourist's distance and waited. Ayer started to walk away, but I stopped him.

He looked at me, curious. "This Jensin, he would stay?"

I looked at the Shivite, felt his third eye on me. I quelled my anger. I was strong again, but more than a fight, I wanted to paint.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, let's try it."

Ayer smiled and set up the stand.

He blew a bubble, and a crowd began to form. The Shivite stood in a pocket of space, silent, unmoving. I sat beside Ayer and watched him work. After a moment, I forgot the Shivite. I began to see the why of each move Ayer made, each color he chose. The bubbles floated up from his hand, performed for the crowd, and burst. I floated with them, once again more than a little mad.

Then Ayer handed me the tube. I stood and blew a bubble, held my hand under it, over his. I painted, and let it go. Blew another, and painted. And another. I forgot the crowd and the Shivite. I forgot Ayer. I stood and painted and I forgot Ayer's hand. Until suddenly I saw he no longer stood beside me. I went still, the bubble floating above my palm, color whirling on its surface. Above *my* palm. His hand was gone, but the bubble floated there anyway, iridescent. A bubble in a bubble.

I almost lost it then, but I sent it up above the crowd to their applause.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My hand was shaking, but I blew another. And held it. And dipped my brush.

And then the Shivite struck.

The whip was there and gone, the bubble spattered on my face and dripping before I realized what had happened. I stared stupidly at my empty palm, then up at the Shivite. It loomed, quiet, blank. I saw myself reflected in its dark shell, and Ayer a white blur beside me.

"Jensin." He took me by the shoulder and tried to turn me. Eventually, I let him. I wiped my face and my palm and let Ayer hand me things to put away. I folded the stand and hung it over my shoulder. The crowd was gone already. Time to take our money and leave. I ignored the Shivite as best I could.

But it followed us, to the shuttle and the lift. And beyond, to the dark lanes where we lived. We pushed through the thinning crowd into the low and narrow alleys and it followed, face floating just below the ceiling, shining faintly in the evenglow.

I pulled Ayer into a crossing lane, away from our home.

"I don't want it waiting outside our door," I told him.

"It follows where it wants." His voice was calm as ever.

"We can lose it."

I began walking swiftly, pulling Ayer with me. He said nothing, only matched my stride, never fighting.

I turned down a side lane, then another, looped back onto yet a third. The dim corridors all looked the same—blank doors, low ceilings, features lost in the ever twilight. I was lost already, but I didn't care.

I heard the Shivite behind us, claws scratching the pavement, and went faster. Ayer lagged a step, then took my arm and turned me into an alley. He led, turning at every corner. We went right, left, left again, ducked through narrow alleys, dodged around bums half-seen against the walls. The stand banged against my hip, the strap cut my shoulder. The scratching followed, kept pace, unhurried behind us.

And finally I stopped at a tee, dim lanes leading off left and right, pulse beating in my ears. Ayer started left, but stopped when I didn't follow. He looked at me, waiting for direction. I had none to give.

I hit the wall with my fist, wishing it were someone's face. Then I turned, listening. The scratching came, turned the corner. The Shivite stood in the center of the lane, tool arms crossed, whips coiled above its gleaming eyes. Waiting.

I unslung the stand from my shoulder, held the folded legs in my hands. And stepped forward.

Ayer said something. I think it was "Friend." I didn't listen, didn't see. I took another step forward.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Shivite struck then, right whip and then left. I took them on the stand, swinging it two-handed. It stepped closer. I held my ground.

And then Ayer grabbed me. He put both arms around me, chest high, and tried to pull me back. He spoke again, but I pulled against him, shouting. I twisted, spun around, trying to dislodge him. I showed my back to the Shivite, and Ayer clinging to me.

I felt the blow through him. Then the next and the next. I knew which whip. He stiffened and cried out. Then spasmed, nearly choking me as his muscles clenched. And falling away as they went limp. I spun, trying to catch him, but the stand was still in my hands and I hit him instead. He fell, mouth working.

I went to one knee beside him, and a whip cracked above my head.

I rolled to one side and came up facing the Shivite, took the next blow on the stand. It paused a second, third eye gleaming. Then it struck again.

I stepped in closer, beating the whips aside. It took a step back, but I was on it, swinging the stand with both hands. A blow above the eyes stunned it. I dodged to the side and hit it again at the base of the skull. The stand shattered. Dye splashed the black shell and ran down its shoulders. I hit it again with the legs and it sagged. And again and again until it fell slowly forward, twisting, to lie askew on the pavement.

I stood there a moment, fists clenched on the broken legs of the stand. It didn't move. Then I went back to Ayer.

But he was already dead, eyes open and dull, white fur gone gray and spattered with dye. I took his stained hands and held them, shaking. Then I closed his eyes and took his knife and went back to the Shivite.

I stood over it, watching the dim light play in the dye that ran along its skull. It had several brains and more than one heart. I knew where they all were. The knife was long enough and sharp. But I took the left whip instead, and cut out the sting and the duct and the gland at its base that made the poison. Then I cleaned the knife and carried Ayer home.

The Shivite still follows me. It knows my doorway now and like as not will be there when I leave in the morning. If not, by midday at the latest, it finds me. It stands at the fringe of the crowd while I blow bubbles and send them soaring over its head. It trails me home at night. Usually, it lets me paint, my dark angel. If not, I leave.

I don't carry the knife. I'm not Ayer. I have a different view of things. It would be too easy. But I carry on his trade. And on the good days, I think I do him honor. ●

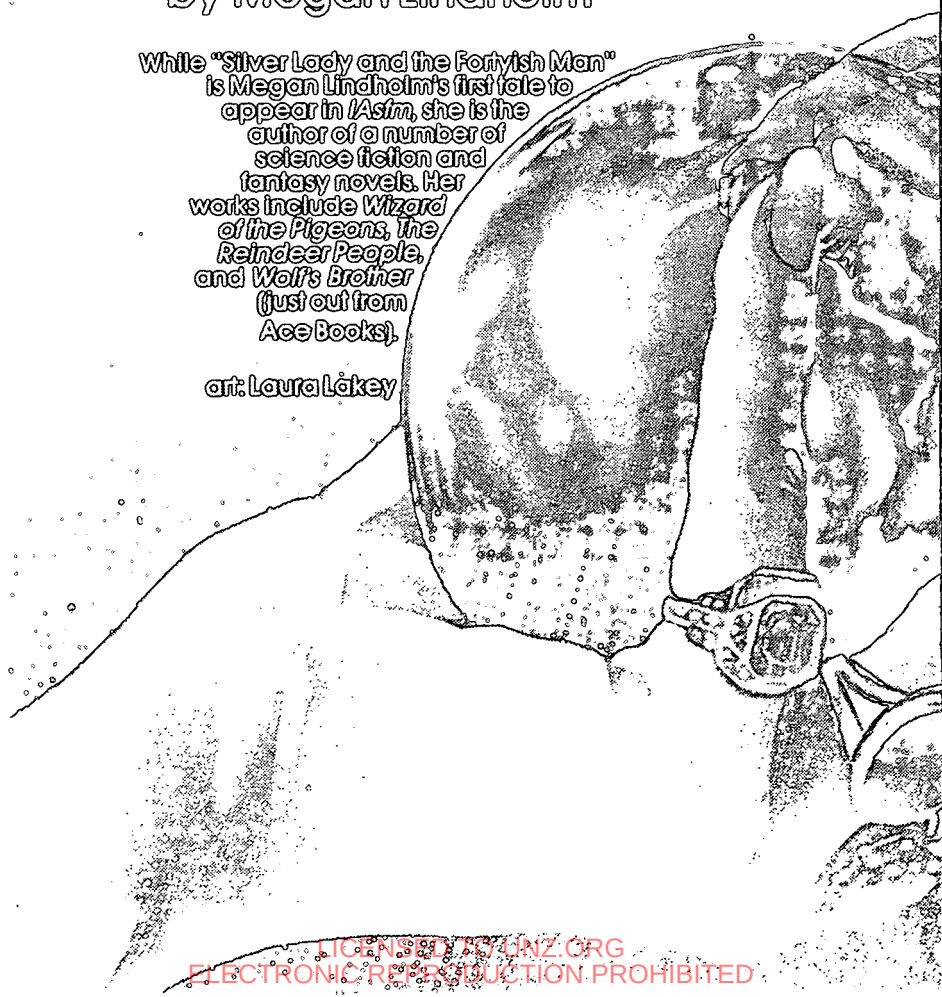
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SILVER LADY AND THE FORTYISH MAN

by Megan Lindholm

While "Silver Lady and the Fortyish Man" is Megan Lindholm's first tale to appear in *IAsfm*, she is the author of a number of science fiction and fantasy novels. Her works include *Wizard of the Pigeons, The Reindeer People,* and *Wolf's Brother* (just out from Ace Books).

art: Laura Lakey



LICENSED TO CSFI.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was about 8:15 P.M. and I was standing near the register in a Sears in a sub-standard suburban mall the first time the fortyish man came in. There were forty-five more minutes to endure before the store would close and I could go home. The Muzak was playing and a Ronald McDonald display was waving at me cheerily from the children's department. I was thinking about how animals in traps chew their legs off. There was a time when I couldn't understand that type of survival mechanism. Now I could. I was wishing for longer, sharper teeth when the fortyish man came in.

For the last hour or so, salespeople had outnumbered customers in the store. A dead night. I was the only salesperson in Ladies' Fashions and Lingerie and I had spent the last two hours straightening dresses on hangers, zipping coats, putting T-shirts in order by size and color, clipping bras on hangers, and making sure all the jeans faced the same way on the racks. Now I was tidying up all the bags and papers under the register counter. Boredom, not dedication. Only boredom can drive someone to be that meticulous, especially for four dollars an hour. One part boredom to two parts despair.

So a customer, *any* kind of a customer, was a welcome distraction. Even a very ordinary fortyish man. He came straight up to my counter, threading his way through the racks without even a glance at the dresses or sweaters or jeans. He walked straight up to me and said, "I need a silk scarf."

Believe me, the last thing this man needed was a silk scarf. He was tall, at least six foot, and had reached that stage in his life where he buckled his belt under his belly. His dark hair was thinning, and the way he combed it did nothing to hide the fact. He wore fortyish-man clothing, and I won't describe it, because if I did you might think there was something about the way he dressed that made me notice him. There wasn't. He was ordinary in the most common sense of the word, and if it had been a busy night in the store, I'd never even have seen him. So ordinary he'd be invisible. The only remarkable thing about him was that he was a fortyish man in a Sears store on a night when we had stayed open longer than our customers had stayed awake. And that he'd said he needed a silk scarf. Men like him *never* buy silk scarves, not for any reason.

But he'd said he needed a silk scarf. And that was a double miracle of sorts, the customer knowing what he wanted, and I actually having it. So I put on my sales smile and asked, "Did you have any particular color in mind, sir?"

"Anything," he said, an edge of impatience in his voice. "As long as it's silk."

The scarf rack was right by the register, arranged with compulsive

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tidiness by me earlier in the shift. Long scarves on the bottom rack, short scarves on the top rack, silk to the left, acrylics to the right, solid colors together in a rainbow spectrum on that row, patterns rioting on that hook, all edges gracefully fluted. Scarves were impulse sales, second sales, "wouldn't you like a lovely blue scarf to go with that sweater, miss?" sales. No one marched into a Sears store at 8:15 at night and demanded a silk scarf. People who needed silk scarves at 8:15 at night went to boutiques for them, little shops that smelled like perfumes or spices and had no Hamburglars lurking in the aisles. But this fortyish man wouldn't know that.

So I leaned across the counter and snagged a handful, let my fingers find the silk ones and pull them gently from their hooks. Silk like woven moonlight in my hands, airy scarves in elusive colors. I spread them out like a rainbow on the counter. "One of these, perhaps?" I smiled persuasively.

"Any of them, it doesn't matter, I just need a piece of silk." He scarcely glanced at them.

And then I said one of those things I sometimes do, the words falling from my lips with sureness, coming from god knows where, meant to put the customer at ease but always getting me into trouble. "To wrap your Tarot cards, undoubtedly."

Bingo, I'd hit it. He lifted his eyes and stared at me, as if suddenly seeing me as a person and not just a saleswoman in a Sears at night. He didn't say anything, just looked at me. It was like having cross-hairs tattooed on my forehead. In exposing him, I had exposed myself. Something like that. I cleared my throat and decided to back off and get a little more formal.

"Cash or charge?" I asked, twitching a blue one from the slithering heap on the counter, and he handed me a ten, and dug for the odd change. I stuffed the scarf in a bag and clipped his receipt on it and that was it. He left, and I spent the rest of my shift making sure that all the coat hangers on the racks were exactly one finger space apart.

I had taken the job in November, hired on in preparation for the Christmas rush, suckered in by the hope that after the new year began I would become full time and get better wages. It was February, and I was still getting less than thirty hours a week and only four dollars an hour. Every time I thought about it, I could feel rodents gnawing at the bottom of my heart. There is a sick despair to needing money so desperately that you can't quit the job that doesn't pay you enough to live on, the job that gives you just enough irregular hours to make job hunting for something better next to impossible. Worst of all was the thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that I'd fashioned and devised this trap myself. I'd leaped into it, in the name of common sense and practicality.

Two years ago I'd quit a job very similar to this one, to live on my hoarded savings and dreams of being a free-lance writer. I'd become a full-time writer, and I loved it. And I'd almost made it. For two years I skimped along, never much above poverty level, but writing and taking photographs, doing a little free-lance journalism to back up the fiction, writing a story here, a story there, and selling them almost often enough to make ends meet.

Almost.

How the hell long can anyone live on *almost?* Buying almost new clothes at the second-hand store, almost fresh bread at the thrift store, almost stylish shoes at the end-of-season sales. Keeping the apartment almost warm, the dripping, rumbling refrigerator keeping food almost cold, telling my friends I was almost there. Almost writing the one really good story that would establish me as a writer to be reckoned with. I still loved it, but I started to notice little things. How my friends always brought food when they came to visit, and my parents sent money on my birthday, and my sister gave me "hand-me-downs" that fit me perfectly, and, once, still had the tags on. This is fine, when you are twenty or so, and just striking out on your own. It is not so good when you are thirty-five and following your chosen career.

One day I woke up and knew that the dream wasn't going to come true. My Muse was a faithless slut who drank all my wine and gave me half a page a day. I demanded more from her. She refused. We quarreled. I begged, I pleaded, I showed her the mounting stacks of bills, but she refused to produce. I gave her an ultimatum, and she ignored me. Left me wordless, facing empty white pages and a stack of bills on the corner of my desk. One of two things happened to me then. I've never decided which it was. Some of my friends told me I'd lost faith. Others said I'd become more practical. I went job-hunting.

In November, I re-entered the wonderful world of retail merchandising, to work a regular nine-to-five job and make an ordinary living, with clockwork paychecks and accounts paid the first time they billed me. I'd leaped back into salesmanship with energy and enthusiasm, pushing for that second sale, persuading women to buy outfits that looked dreadful on them, always asking if they wanted to apply for our charge card. I'd been a credit to the department. All management praised me. But no one gave me a raise, and full time hours were a mirage on the horizon. I limped along, making *almost* enough money to make ends meet. It felt very familiar. Except that I didn't love what I did. I was stuck with it. I wasn't any better off than I had been.

And I wasn't writing anymore, either.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My Muse had always been a fickle bitch, and the moment I pulled on panty-hose and clipped on an "I AM SEARS" tag, she moved out, lock, stock, and inspiration. If I had no faith in her power to feed me, then to hell with me, was the sentiment as she expressed it. All or nothing, that was her, like my refrigerator, either freezing it all or dripping the vegetable bin full of water. All or nothing, no half-way meetings. So it was nothing, and my days off were spent, not pounding the keys, but going to the laundromat, where one can choose between watching one's underwear cavort gaily in the dryer window, or watching gaunt women in mis-matched outfits abuse their children. ("That's *it,* Bobby! That's it, I absolutely mean it, you little shit! Now you go stand by that basket and you hold onto it with both hands, and don't you *move* until I tell you you can. You move one step away from that basket and I'm going to whack you. You hear me, Bobby? YOU (Whack!) GET YOUR (Whack!) HANDS ON THAT (Whack!) BASKET! Now shut up or I'll *really* give you something to cry about!") I usually watched my underwear cavorting through the fluff-dry cycle.

And so I worked at Sears, from nine to one, or from five to nine, occasionally getting an eight hour day, but seldom more than a twenty-four hour week, watching income not quite equal out-go, paying bills with a few dollars and many promises, spacing it out with plastic, and wondering, occasionally, what the hell I was going to do when it all caught up with me and fell apart.

Days passed. Not an elegant way to express it, but accurate. So there I was again, one weekday night, after eight, dusting the display fixtures and waiting for closing time, wondering why we stayed open when the rest of the mall closed at seven. And the fortyish man came in again. I remembered him right away. He didn't look any different from the first time, except that this time he was a little more real to me because I had seen him before. I stood by my counter, feather duster in hand, and watched him come on, wondering what he wanted this time.

He had a little plastic container of jasmine potpourri, from the bath and bedding department. He set it on the counter and asked, "Can I pay for this here?"

I was absolutely correct as a salesperson. "Certainly, sir. At Sears, we can ring up purchases from any department at any register. We do our best to make things convenient for our customers. Cash or charge?"

"Cash," he said, and as I asked, "Would you like to fill out an application for our Sears or Discover Charge Card? It makes shopping at Sears even more convenient, and in addition to charging, either card can be used as a check cashing card," he set three Liberty Walking silver dollars, circa 1923, on the plastic countertop between us. Then he stood and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

looked down at me, like I was a rat and he'd just dropped a pre-fab maze into place around me.

"Sure you want to use those?" I asked him, and he nodded without speaking.

So I rang up the jasmine potpourri and dropped the three silver dollars into the till, wishing I could keep them for myself, but we weren't allowed to have our purses or any personal cash out on the selling floor, so there was no way I could redeem them and take them home. I knew someone would nab them before they ever got to the bank, but it wasn't going to be me, and wasn't that just the way my whole life had been going lately? The fortyish man took his jasmine potpourri in his plastic Sears bag with the receipt stapled on the outside of it and left. As he left, I said, "Have a nice evening, sir, and thank you for shopping at our Sears store." To which he replied solemnly, "Silver Lady, this job is going to kill you." Just like that, with the capital letters in the way he said it, and then he left.

Now I've been called a lot of things by a lot of men, but Silver Lady isn't one of them. Mud duck. More of a mud duck, that's me, protective coloring, not too much makeup, muted colors in my clothes, unobtrusive jewelry if any at all. Camouflage. Dress just enough like anyone else so that no one notices you, that's the safest way. In high school, I believed I was invisible. If anyone looked at me, I would pick my nose and examine it until they looked away. They hardly ever looked back. I'd outgrown those tricks a long time ago, of course, but *Silver Lady?* That was a ridiculous thing to call me, unless he was mocking me, and I didn't think he had been. But somehow it seemed *worse* that he had been serious, and it stung worse than an insult, because he had seemed to see in me something that I couldn't imagine in myself. Stung all the sharper because he was an ordinary fortyish man, run of the mill, staid and regular, pot-belly and thinning hair, and it wasn't *fair* that he could imagine more about me than I could about myself. I mean, hell, I'm the writer, the one with the wild imagination, the vivid dreams, the razor-edged visions, right?

So. I worked out my shift, chewing on my tongue until closing time, and it wasn't until I had closed my till, stapled my receipts together, and chained off the dressing room that I noticed the little box on the corner of my counter. Little cardboard jewelry box, silver tone paper on the outside, no bag, no label, no nothing, just the silver stripes and Nordstrom in elegant lettering on the outside. A customer had forgotten it there, and I shoved it into my skirt pocket to turn it in at Customer Convenience on my way out.

I went home, climbed the stairs to my apartment, stepping in the neighbor's cat turd on the way up, got inside, cleaned off my shoe, washed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my hands five or six times, and put the kettle on for a cup of tea. I dropped into a chair and got jabbed by the box in my pocket. And the "oh, shit, here's trouble come knocking" feeling washed over me in a deep brown wave.

I knew what would happen. Some customer would come looking for it, and no one would know anything about it, but security would have picked me up on their closed circuit camera inside their little plastic bubbles on the ceiling. This was going to be it, the end of my rotten, low-paying little job, and my rent was due in two weeks, and this time the landlord wanted all of it at once. So I sat, holding the little silver box, and cursing my fate.

I opened it. I mean, what the hell, when there's no place left but down, one might as well indulge one's curiosity, so I opened it. Inside were two large earrings, each as long as my thumb. Silver ladies. They wore long gowns and their hair and gowns were swept back from their bodies by an invisible wind that pressed the metallic fabric of their bodices close against their high breasts and whipped their hair into frothy silver curls. They didn't match, not quite, and they weren't intended to be identical. I knew I could go to Nordstrom's and search for a hundred years and I'd never find anything like them. Their faces were filled with serenity and invitation, and they weighed heavy in my hand. I didn't doubt they were real silver, and that someone had fashioned them, one at a time, to be the only ones of their kinds. And I *knew,* like *knowing* about the Tarot cards, that the fortyish man had made them and brought them and left them, and they were for me.

Only I don't have pierced ears.

So I put them back on the cotton in their little box and set them on my table, but I didn't put the lid back on. I looked at them, now and then, as I fixed myself a nutritious and totally adequate Western Family chicken pot pie for dinner and ate it out of the little aluminum pan and followed it with celery with peanut butter on it and raisins on top of the peanut butter.

That evening I did a number of useful and necessary things, like defrosting the refrigerator, washing out my panty-hose, spraying my shoes with Lysol spray, and dribbling bleach on the landing outside my apartment in the hopes it would keep the neighbor's cat away. I also put my bills in order by due date, and watered the stump of the houseplant I'd forgotten to water last week. And then, because I wasn't writing, and the evening can get very long when you're not writing, I did something I had once seen my sister and two of her girlfriends do when I was thirteen and they were seventeen and rather drunk. I took four ice cubes and a sewing needle and went into the bathroom and unwrapped a bar of soap. The idea is, you sandwich your earlobes between the ice cubes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and hold them there until they're numb. Then you put the bar of soap behind your earlobe to hold it steady, and you push the sewing needle through. Your earlobes are numb, so it doesn't hurt, but it is weird because you hear the sound the needle makes going through your earlobe. On the first ear. On the second ear, it hurt like hell, and a big drop of blood welled out and dripped down the side of my neck, and I screamed "Oh, SHIT!" and banged my fist on the bathroom counter and broke a blood vessel in my hand, which hurt worse than my ears.

But it was done, and when my ears quit bleeding, I went and got the earrings and stood before the mirror and threaded their wires through my raw flesh. The wires were thin, and they pulled at the new holes in my ears, and it couldn't have hurt more if I'd hung a couple of anvils from my bleeding earlobes. But they looked beautiful. I stood looking at what they did to my neck and the angle of my jaw and the way they made the stray twining of my hair seem artful and deliberate. I smiled, serene and inviting, and almost I could see his Silver Lady in my own mirror.

But like I say, they hurt like hell, and tiny drips of my blood were sliding down the silver wires, and I couldn't imagine sleeping with those things swinging from my ears all night. So I lifted them out and put them back in their box and the wires tinged the cotton pink. Then I wiped my earlobes with hydrogen peroxide, shivering at the sting. And I went to bed wondering if my ears would get infected.

They didn't, they healed, and the holes didn't grow shut, even though I didn't keep anything in them to hold them open. A Friday came when there was a breath of spring in the air, and I put on a pale blue blouse that I hadn't worn in so long that it felt like new again. Just before I left my apartment, I went back, and got the box and went to the bathroom and hung the silver ladies from my ears. I went to work.

Felicia, my department head, complimented me on them, but said they didn't look, quite, well, professional, to wear to work. I agreed she was probably right, and when I nodded, I felt their pleasant weight swinging on my ears. I didn't take them off. I collected my cash bag and went to open up my till.

I worked until six that day, and I smiled at people and they smiled back, and I didn't really give a damn how much I sold, but I sold probably twice as much as I'd ever sold before, maybe because I didn't give a damn. At the end of my shift, I got my coat and purse and collected my week's paycheck and decided to walk out through the mall instead of through the back door. The mall was having 4-H week, and I got a kick out of seeing the kids with their animals, bored cats sitting in cages stuffed full of kitty toys, little signs that say things like, "Hi, my name is Peter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pan, and I'm a registered Lop Rabbit," an incubator full of peeping chicks, and, right in the middle of the mall, someone had spread black plastic and scattered straw on top of it, and a pudgy girl with dark pigtails was demonstrating how to groom a unicorn.

I looked again, and it was a white billy goat, and one that was none too happy about being groomed. I shook my head, and felt the silver ladies swing, and as I turned away, the fortyish man stepped out of the Herb and Tea Emporium with an armful of little brown bags. He swung into pace beside me, smelling like cinnamon, oranges and cloves, and said, "You've just got to see this chicken. It plays tic-tac-toe."

Sure enough, some enterprising 4-H'er had rigged up a board with red and blue lights for the x's and o's, and for a quarter donation, the chicken would play tic-tac-toe with you. It was the fattest old rooster I'd ever seen, its comb hanging rakishly over one eye, and it beat me three times running. Which was about half my coffee money for the week, but what the hell, how often do you get the chance to play tic-tac-toe with a chicken?

The fortyish man played him and won, which brought the rooster up to the bars of the cage, flapping its wings and striking out, and I found myself dragging the fortyish man back out of beak range while the young owner of the rooster tried to calm his bird. We just laughed, and he took my elbow and guided me into a little Mexican restaurant that opens off the mall, and we found a table and sat down. The first thing I said was, "This is ridiculous. I don't even know you, and here I find myself defending you from irate roosters and having dinner with you."

And he said, "Permit me to introduce myself, then. I am Merlin."

I nearly walked out right then.

It's like this. I'm a skeptic. I have this one friend, a very nice woman. But she's always saying things like, "I can tell by your aura that you are troubled today," or talking about how I stunt my spiritual growth by ignoring my latent psychic powers. Once she phoned me up at eleven at night, long distance, *collect,* to tell me she'd just had a psychic experience. She was house-sitting for a friend in a big old house on Whidby Island. She was sitting watching television, when she clearly heard the sound of footsteps going up the stairs. Only from where she was sitting, she could (she says) see the stairs quite clearly and there was no one there. So she froze, and she heard footsteps going along the upstairs hallway and then she heard the bathroom door shut. Then, she said, she heard the unmistakable and noisy splashing of a man urinating. The toilet flushed, and then all was silence. When she got up the nerve to go check the upstairs bathroom, there was no one there. But—THE SEAT WAS UP! So she had phoned me right away to jar me from my skepticism. Every time she comes over, she always has to throw her rune chips for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me, and for some reason, they always spell out death and disaster and horrendous bad fortune just around the bend for me. Which may actually prove that she's truly psychic, because that fortune had never been far wrong for me. But it doesn't keep me from kidding her about her ghostly urinator. She's a friend, and she puts up with it, and I put up with psychic-magic-spiritualism jazz.

But the fortyish man I didn't know at all—well, at least not much, and I wasn't going to put up with it from him. That was pushing it too far. There he was, fortyish and balding and getting a gut, and expecting me to listen to him talk weird as well. I mean, okay, I'm thirty-five, but everyone says I look a lot younger, and while only *one* man had ever called me Silver Lady, the rest haven't exactly called me Dog Meat. Maybe I'm not attractive in the standard, popular sense, but people who see me don't shudder and look away. Mostly they just tend not to see me. But at any rate, I *did* know that I wasn't so desperate that I had to latch onto a fortyish man with wing-nut ideas for company. Except that just then the waitress walked past on her way to the next table, laden with two combination plates, heavy white china loaded to the gunnels with enchiladas and tacos and burritos, garnished with dollops of white sour cream and pale green guacamole, with black olives frisking dangerously close to the lip of the plate, and I suddenly knew I could listen to anyone talk about anything a lot more easily than I could go home and face Banquet Fried Chicken, its flaking brown crust covered with thick hoarfrost from my faulty refrigerator. So I did.

We ordered and we ate and he talked and I listened. He told me things. He was not *the* Merlin, but he did know he was descended from him. Magic was not what it had been at one time, but he got by. One quote I remember exactly. "The only magic that's left in the world right now is the magic that we make ourselves, deliberately. You're not going to stumble over enchantment by chance. You have to be open to it, looking for it, and when you first think you might have glimpsed it, you have to *will* it into your life with every machination available to you." He paused. He leaned forward to whisper, "But the magic is never quite what you expect it to be. Almost, but never exactly." And then he leaned back and smiled at me, and I knew what he was going to say next.

He went on about the magic he sensed inside me, and how he could help me open myself up to it. He could feel that I was suppressing a talent. It was smooth, the way he did it. I think that if I had been ten or fifteen years younger, I could have relaxed and gone alone with it, maybe even been flattered by it. Maybe if *he* had been five or ten years younger, I would have chosen to be gullible, just for the company. But dinner was drawing to a close, and I had a hunch what was going to come after dinner, so I just sort of shook my head and said that nothing in my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

life had ever made me anything but a skeptic about magic and ESP and psychic phenomena and all the rest of that stuff. And then he said what I knew he would, that if I'd care to come by his place he could show me a few things that would change my mind in a hurry. I said that I'd really enjoyed talking to him and dinner had been fun, but I didn't think I knew him well enough to go to his apartment. Besides, I was afraid I had to get home and wash my hair because I had the early shift again tomorrow morning. He shrugged and sat back in his chair and said he understood completely and I was wise to be cautious, that women weren't the only ones distressed by so-called "date-rapes." He said that in time I would learn that I could trust him, and someday we'd probably laugh about my first impression of him.

I agreed, and we chuckled a little, and the waitress brought more coffee and he excused himself to use the men's room. I sat, stirring sugar and creamer into my coffee, and wondering if it wouldn't be wiser to skip out now, just leave a little note that I had discovered it was later than I thought and I had to hurry home but that I'd had a lovely time and thank-you. But that seemed like a pretty snakey thing to do to him. It wasn't like he was repulsive or anything, actually he was pretty nice and had very good eyes, dark brown, and a shy way of looking aside when he smiled and a wonderful voice that reminded me of cello strings. I suppose it was that he was fortyish and balding and had a pot-belly. If that makes me sound shallow, well, I'm sorry. If he'd been a little younger, I could probably have warmed up to him. If *I'd* been a little younger, too, maybe I would even have gone to his apartment to be de-skepticised. But he wasn't and I wasn't and I wouldn't. But I wasn't going to be rude to him, either. He didn't deserve that. So I sat, toughing it out.

He'd left his packages of tea on the table and I picked one up and read it. I had to smile. Magic Carpet Tea. It smelled like orange spice to me. Earl Grey tea had been re-named Misplaced Dreams Tea. The scent of the third was unfamiliar to me, maybe one of those pale green ones, but it was labeled Dragon's Breath Tea. The fortyish man was really into this psychic-magic thing, I could tell, and in a way I felt a little sorry for him. A grown man, on the slippery-slide down side of his fortieth birthday, clinging to fairy-tales and magic, still hoping something would *happen* in his life, some miracle more wondrous than financing a new car or finding out the leaky hot-water heater is still under warranty. It wasn't going to happen, not to him, not to me, and I felt a little more gentle toward him as I leaned back in my chair and waited for him to return.

He didn't. You found that out a lot faster than I did. I sat and waited and drank coffee, and it was only when the waitress re-filled my cup that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I realized how long it had been. His coffee was cold by then, and so was my stomach. I knew he'd stuck me with the check and why. I could almost hear him telling one of his buddies, "Hey, if the chick's not going to come across, why waste the bread, man?" Body slammed by humiliation that I'd been so gullible, I wondered if the whole magic thing was something he just used as a lure for women. Probably. And here I'd been preening myself, just a little, all through dinner, thinking that he was still seeing in me the possibility of magic and enchantment, that for him I had some special fey glow.

Well, my credit cards were bottomed out, I had less than two bucks in cash, and my check book was at home. In the end, the restaurant manager reluctantly cashed my paycheck for me, probably only because he knew Sears wouldn't write a rubber check and I could show him my employee badge. Towards the end he was even sympathetic about the fortyish man treating me so badly, which was even worse, because he acted like my poor little heart was broken instead of me just being damn mad and embarrassed. As I was leaving, finally, let me get *out* of here, the waitress handed me the three little paper bags of tea with such a condescending "poor baby" look that I wanted to spit at her. And I went home.

The strange part is that I actually cried after I got home, more out of frustration and anger than any hurt, though. I wished that I knew his real name, so I could call him up and let him know what I thought of such a cheap trick. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, looking at my red eyes and swollen runny nose, and I suddenly knew that the restaurant people had been seeing me more clearly than I or the fortyish man did. Not Silver Lady or even mud duck, but plain middle-aged woman in a blue-collar job with no prospects at all. For a moment it got to me, but then I stood up straight and glared at the mirror. I felt the silver ladies swinging from my ears, and as I looked at them, it occurred to me that they were probably worth a lot more than the meal I had just paid for, and that I had his tea, to boot. So, maybe he hadn't come out of it any better than I had, these earrings hadn't gotten him laid, and if he had skipped out without paying for the meal, he'd left his tea as well, and those specialty shop teas don't come cheap. For the first time, it occurred to me that things didn't add up, quite. But I put it out of my mind, fixed myself a cup of Misplaced Dreams Tea, read for a little while, and then went to bed.

I dreamed about him. Not surprising, considering what he'd put me through. I was in a garden, standing by a silver bench shaded by an arching trellis heavy with a dark green vine full of fragrant pink flowers. The fortyish man was standing before me, and I could see him, but I had the sense that he was disembodied, not really there at all. "I want to apologize," he said, quite seriously. "I never would have left you that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way voluntarily. I'm afraid I was magicked away by one of my archrivals. The same one who has created the evil spell that distresses you. He's imprisoned me in a crystal, so I'm afraid I won't be seeing you for a while."

In this dream, I was clad in a gown made of peacock feathers, and I had silver rings on all my fingers. Little silver bells were on fine chains around my ankles. They tinkled as I stepped closer to him. "Isn't there anything I can do to help you?" my dream-self asked.

"Oh, I think not," he replied. "I just didn't want you to think badly of me." Then he smiled. "Silver Lady, you are one of the few who would worry first about breaking the enchantment that binds me, rather than plotting how to break your own curse. I cannot help but believe that the forces that balance all magic will find a way to free us both."

"May you be right, my friend," I replied.

And that was the end of the dream, or the end of as much as I can remember. I awoke in the morning with vague memories of a cat batting at tinkling silver chimes swinging in a perfumed wind. I had a splitting headache. I got out of bed, got dressed, and went to work at Sears.

For a couple of days, I kept expecting him to turn up again, but he didn't. I just kept going along. I told Felicia that I couldn't live on the hours and pay I was getting, and she told me that she was very disappointed with the number of credit applications I was turning in, and that full-time people were only chosen from the most dedicated and enthusiastic part-timers. I said I'd have to start looking for work elsewhere, and she said she understood. We both knew there wasn't much work of any kind to be had, and that I could be replaced with a bored house-wife or a desperate community college student at a moment's notice. It was not reassuring.

In the next three weeks, I passed out twenty-seven copies of my resume to various bored people at desks. I interviewed for two jobs that were just as low-paying as the one I already had. I found a fantastic job that would have loved to hire me, but its funding called for it to be given to a displaced homemaker or a disadvantaged worker. Then I called on a telephone interviewing position ad in the paper. They liked my voice and asked me to come in. After a lot of pussyfooting, it turned out to be a job where you answered toll calls from heavy breathers and conversed animatedly about their sexual fantasies. "Sort of an improvisational theater of the erotic," said my interviewer. She had some tapes of some sample calls, and I found myself listening to them and admitting, yes, it sounded easy. Best of all, the interviewer told me, I could work from my own home, doing the dishes or sorting laundry while telling some man how much I'd like to run a warm sponge over his body, slathering every nook and cranny of his flesh with soapsuds until he gleamed, and then, when

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he was hard and warm and wet, I'd take him and . . . for six to seven dollars an hour. They even had pamphlets that explained sexual practices I might not be familiar with and gave the correct jargon to use when chatting about them. Six to seven dollars an hour. I told the interviewer I'd have to think about it, and went home.

And got up the next day and defrosted the refrigerator again and swept the carpet in the living room because I was out of vacuum bags. Then I did all the mending that I had been putting off for weeks, scrubbed the landing outside my apartment door and sprayed it with Cat-B-Gon, and thought about talking on the telephone to men about sex, and how I could do it while I was ironing a shirt or arranging flowers in a vase or wiping cat-turds off my shoe. Then I took a shower and changed and went in to work at Sears for the five to nine evening shift. I told myself that the work wasn't dirty or difficult, that my co-workers were pleasant people and that there was no reason why this job should make me so depressed.

It didn't help.

The mall was having Craft Week, and to get to Sears I had to pass all the tables and people. I wondered why I didn't get busy and make things in the evenings and sell them on the weekends and make ends meet that way. I passed Barbie dolls whose pink crocheted skirts concealed spare rolls of toilet paper, and I saw wooden key-chains that spelled out names, and ceramic butterfly windchimes, and a booth of rubber-stamps, and a booth with clusters of little pewter and crystal sculptures displayed on tables made of old doors set across saw-horses. I slowed a little as I passed that one, for I've always had a weakness for pewter. There were the standard dragons and wizards, and some thunder-eggs cut in half with wizard figures standing inside them. There were birds, too, eagles and falcons and owls of pewter, and one really nice stag almost as big as my hand. For fifty-two dollars. I was looking at it when I heard a woman standing behind me say, "I'd like the crystal holding the wizard, please."

And the owner of the stall smiled at her and said, "You mean the wizard holding the crystal, right?" and the woman said, in this really snotty voice, "Quite."

So the owner wrapped up the little figurine of a wizard holding a crystal ball in several layers of tissue paper, and held it out to the woman and said, "Seventeen-seventy-eight, please," and the woman was digging in her purse and I swear, all I did was try to step out of their way.

I guess my coat caught on a corner of the door or something, for in the next instant everything was tilting and sliding. I tried to catch the edge of the door-table, but it landed on the woman's foot, really hard, as all the crystal and pewter crashed to the floor and scattered across the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

linoleum like a shattered whitecap. The woman screamed and threw up her hands and the little wrapped wizard went flying.

I'm not sure if I really saw this.

The crystal ball flew out of the package and landed separately on the floor. It didn't shatter or tinkle or crash. It went Poof! with a minute puff of smoke. And the crumple of tissue paper floated down emptily.

"You stupid bitch!" the woman yelled at me, and the owner of the booth glared at me and said, "I hope to hell you have insurance, klutz!"

Which is a dumb thing to say, really, and I couldn't think of any answer. People were turning to stare, and moving toward us to see what the excitement was, and the woman had sort of collapsed and was holding onto her foot, saying, "My god, it's broken, it's broken."

I knew, quite abruptly and coldly, that she wasn't talking about her foot.

Then the fortyish man grabbed me by the elbow and said, "We've got to get out of here!" I let him pull me away, and the funny thing is, no one tried to stop us or chase us or anything. The crowd closed up around the woman on the floor like an amoeba engulfing a tidbit.

Then we were in a pickup truck that smelled like a wet dog, and the floor was cluttered with muddy newspapers and styrofoam coffee cups and wrappers from Hostess Fruit Pies and paper boats from the textured vegetable protein burritos they sell in the Seven-Eleven stores.

Part of me was saying that I was crazy to be driving off with this guy I hardly knew who had stuck me with the bill for dinner, and part of me was saying that I had better get back to Sears, maybe I could explain being this late for work. And part of me just didn't give a shit anymore, it just wanted to flee. And that part felt better than it had in ages.

We pulled up outside a little white house and he turned to me gravely and said, "Thank you for rescuing me."

"This is really dumb," I said, and he said, "Maybe so, but it's all we've got. I told you, magic isn't what it used to be."

So we went inside the little house and he put the tea kettle on. It was a beautiful kettle, shining copper with a white and blue ceramic handle, and the cups and saucers he took down matched it. I said, "You stuck me with the bill at the restaurant."

He said, "My enemies fell upon me in the restroom and magicked me away. I told you. I never would have chosen to leave you that way, Silver Lady. But for your intervention today, I would still be in their powers." Then he turned, holding a little tin cannister in each hand and asked, "Which will you have: Misplaced Dreams or Forgotten Sweetness?"

"Forgotten Sweetness," I said, and he put down both cannisters of tea and took me in his arms and kissed me. And yes, I could feel his stomach sticking out a little against mine, and when I put my hand to the back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of his head to hold his mouth against mine, I could tell his hair was thinning. But I also thought I could hear windchimes and scent an elusive perfume on a warm breeze. I don't believe in magic. The idea of willing enchantment into my life is dumb. Dumb. But as the fortyish man had said, it was all we had. A dumb hope for a small slice of magic, no matter how thin. The fortyish man didn't waste his energy carrying me to the bedroom.

I never met a man under twenty-five who was worth the powder to blow him to hell. They're all stuck in third gear.

It takes a man until he's thirty to understand what gentleness is about, and a few years past that to realize that a woman touches a man as she would like him to touch her.

By thirty-five, they start to grasp how a woman's body is wired. They quit trying to kick-start us, and learn to make sure the battery is charged before turning the key. A few, I've heard, learn how to let a woman make love to them.

Fortyish men understand pacing. They know it doesn't have to all happen at once, that separating each stimulus can intensify each touch. They know when pausing is more poignant than continuing, and they know when continuing is more important than a ceramic kettle whistling itself dry on an electric burner.

And afterwards I said to him, "Have you ever heard of 'Lindholm's Rule of Ten'?"

He frowned an instant. "Isn't that the theory that the first ten times two people make love, one will do something that isn't in sync with the other?"

"That's the one," I said.

"It's been disproved," he said solemnly. And he got up and went to the bathroom while I rescued the smoking kettle from the burner.

I stood in the kitchen, and after a while I started shivering, because the place wasn't all that well heated. Putting my clothes back on didn't seem polite somehow, so I called through the bathroom door, "Shall I put on more water for tea?"

He didn't answer, and I didn't want to yell through the door again, so I picked up my blouse and slung it around my shoulders and shivered for a while. I sort of paced through his kitchen and living room. I found myself reading the titles of his books, one of the best ways to politely spy on someone. *Theories of Thermodynamics* was right next to *The Silmarillion*. All the books by Carlos Castenada were set apart on a shelf by themselves. His set of Kipling was bound in red leather. My ass was freezing, and I suspected I had a rug burn on my back. To hell with being polite. I went and got my underwear and skirt and stood in the kitchen, putting them on.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Merlin?" I called questioningly as I picked up my pantyhose. They were shot, a huge laddered run up the back of one leg. I bunched them up and shoved them into my purse. I went and knocked on the bathroom door, saying, "I'm coming in, okay?" And when he didn't answer, I opened the door.

There was no one in there. But I was sure that was where he had gone, and the only other exit from the bathroom was a small window with three pots of impatiens blooming on the sill. The only clue that he had been there was the used rubber floating pathetically in the toilet. There is nothing less romantic than a used rubber.

I went and opened the bedroom door and looked in there. He hadn't made his bed this morning. I backed out.

I actually waited around for a while, pretending he would come back. I mean, his clothes were still in a heap on the floor. How he could have gotten re-dressed and left the house without my noticing it, I didn't try to figure out. But after an hour or so, it didn't matter how he had done anything. He was *gone*.

I didn't cry. I had been too stupid to allow myself to cry. None of this made sense, but my behavior made the least sense of all. I finished getting dressed and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Great. Smeared makeup and nothing to repair it with, so I washed it all off. Let the lines at the corners of my mouth and the circles under my eyes show. Who cared. My hair had gone wild. My legs were white-fleshed and goosebumpy without the pantyhose. The cute little ankle-strap heels on my bare feet looked grotesque. All of me looked rumpled and used. It matched how I felt, an outfit that perfectly complemented my mood, so I got my purse and left.

The old pickup was still outside. That didn't make sense either, but I didn't really give a damn.

I walked home. That sounds simpler than it was. The weather was raw, I was barelegged and in heels, it was getting dark and people stared at me. It took me about an hour, and by the time I got there I had rubbed a huge blister on the back of one of my feet, so I was limping as well. I went up the stairs, narrowly missing the moist brown pile the neighbor's cat had left for me, unlocked my apartment door and went in.

And I still didn't cry. I kicked off my shoes and got into my old baggy sweatsuit and went to the kitchen. I made myself hot chocolate in a little china pot with forget-me-nots on it, and opened the eight ounce canned genuine all-the-way-from-England Cross and Blackwell plum pudding that my sister had given me last Christmas and I had saved in case of disasters like this. I cut the whole thing up and arranged it on a bone china plate on a little tray with my pot of hot chocolate and a cup and saucer. I set it on a little table by my battered easy chair, put a quilt on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the chair and got down my old leather copy of Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*. Then I headed for the bathroom, intending to take a quick hot shower and dab on some rose oil before settling down for the evening. It was my way of apologizing to myself for hurting myself this badly.

I opened the bathroom door, and a stenchful cloud of sulphurous green smoke wafted out. Choking and gasping, I peered in, and there was the fortyish man, clad only in a towel, smiling at me apologetically. He looked apprehensive. He had a big raw scrape on one knee, and a swollen lump on his forehead. He said, "Silver Lady, I never would have left you like that, but. . . ."

"You were teleported away by your arch rival," I finished.

He said, "No, not teleported, exactly, this involved a spell requiring a monkey's paw and a dozen nightshade berries. But they were *last* year's berries, and not potent enough to hold me. I had a spell of my own up my sleeve and. . . ."

"You blasted him to kingdom come," I guessed.

"No." He looked a little abashed. "Actually, it was the 'Incessant Rectal Itch' spell, a little crude, but always effective and simple to use. I doubt that he'll be bothering us again soon." He paused, then added, "As I've told you, magic isn't what it used to be." Then he sniffed a few times and said, "Actually, I've found that Pinesol is the best stuff for getting rid of spell residues. . . ."

So we cleaned up the bathroom. I poured hydrogen peroxide over his scraped knee and he made gasping noises and cursed in a language I'd never heard before. I left him doing that and went into the kitchen and began re-heating the hot chocolate. A few moments later he came out dressed in a sort of sarong he'd made from one of my bed sheets. It looked strangely elegant on him, and the funny thing was, neither of us seemed to feel awkward as we sat down and drank the hot chocolate and shared the plum pudding. The last piece of plum pudding he took, and borrowing some cream cheese from my refrigerator, he buttered a cabalistic sign onto it. Then he went to the door and called, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty."

The neighbor's cat came at once, and the ratty old thing let the fortyish man scoop him up and bring him into my living room, where he removed two ticks from behind its ears and then fed it the plum pudding in small bites. When he had done that, he picked it up and stared long into its yellowish eyes before he intoned, "By bread and cream I bind you. Nevermore shalt thou shit upon the threshold of this abode." Then he put the cat gently out the door, observing aloud, "Well, that takes care of the curse you were under."

I stared at him. "I thought my curse had something to do with me working at Sears."

"No. That was just a viciously cruel thing you were doing to yourself,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for reasons I will never understand." He must have seen the look on my face, because after a while he said, "I told you, the magic is never quite what you think it to be."

Then he came to sit on the floor beside my easy chair. He put his elbow on my knee and leaned his chin in his hand. "What if I were to tell you, Silver Lady, that I myself have no real magic at all? That, actually, I climbed out my bathroom window and sneaked through the streets in my towel to meet you here? Because I wanted you to see me as special."

I didn't say anything.

"What if I told you I really work for Boeing, in Personnel?"

I just looked at him, and he lifted his elbow from my knee and turned aside a little. He glanced at his own bare feet, and then over at my machine. He licked his lips and spoke softly. "I could get you a job there. As a word processor, at about eleven dollars an hour."

"Merlin," I said warningly.

"Well, maybe not eleven dollars an hour to start. . . ."

I reached out and brushed what hair he had back from his receding hairline. He looked up at me and then smiled the smile where he always looked aside from me. We didn't say anything at all. I took his hand and led him to my room, where we once more disproved Lindholm's Rule of Ten. I fell asleep curled around him, my hand resting comfortably on the curve of his belly. He was incredibly warm, and smelled of oranges, cloves, and cinnamon. Misplaced Dreams Tea, that's what he smelled like. And that night I dreamed I wore a peacock feather gown and strolled through a misty garden. I had found something I had lost, and I carried it in my hand, but every time I tried to look at it to see what it was, the mist swirled up and hid my hand from me.

In the morning when I woke up, the fortyish man was gone.

It didn't really bother me. I knew that either he would be back, or he wouldn't, but either way no one could take from me what I already had, and what I already had was a lot more magic than most people get in their lives. I put on my ratty old bathrobe and my silver ladies and went out into the livingroom. His sarong sheet was folded up on the easy chair in the livingroom, and the neighbor's cat was asleep on it, his paws tucked under his chin.

And my Muse was there, too, perched on the corner of my desk, one knee under her chin as she painted her toenails. She looked up when I came in and said, "If you're quite finished having a temper tantrum, we'll get on with your career now." So I sat down at my machine and flicked the switch on and put my fingers on the home row.

Funny thing. The keys weren't even dusty. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

REAL TIME

art: Anthony Bari

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

"Real Time" is Lawrence Watt-Evans' second story to appear in *IAsfm.* His first, "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers," was his first short story to see publication as well. That tale was also the winner of our 2nd annual Readers' Award and the recipient of the 1987 Hugo award.

Someone was tampering with time again; I could feel it, in my head and in my gut, that sick, queasy sensation of unreality.

I put my head down and gulped air, waiting for the discomfort to pass, but it only got worse.

This was a bad one. Someone was tampering with something serious.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This wasn't just someone reading tomorrow's papers and playing the stock market, this was *serious*. Someone was trying to change history.

I couldn't allow that. Not only might his tampering interfere with my own past, change my whole life, possibly even wipe me out of existence, but I'd be shirking my job. I couldn't do that.

Not that anyone would know. They must think I'm dead. I haven't been contacted in years now, not since I was stranded in this century. They must think I was lost when my machine and my partner vanished in the flux.

But I'm not dead, and I had a job to do. With help from headquarters or without, with a partner or without, even with my machine or without, I had a job to do, a reality to preserve, a whole world to safeguard. I knew my duty. I *know* my duty. The past can't take tampering.

They might send someone else, but they might not. The tampering might have already changed things too much. They might not spot it in time. Or they might simply not have the manpower. Time travel lets you use your manpower efficiently, with one hundred percent efficiency, putting it anywhere you need it instantly, but that's not enough when you have all of the past to guard, everything from the dawn of time to the present—not *this* present, the *real* present—you'd need a million men to guard it all, and they've always had trouble recruiting. The temptations are too great. The dangers are too great. Look at me, stuck here in the past, for the dangers—and as for the temptations, look at what I have to do. People trying to *change* everything, trying to benefit themselves at the cost of reality itself—they need men they can *trust,* men like me, and there can never be enough of us.

I sat up straight again and I looked at the mirror behind the bar and I knew what I had to do. I had to stop the tampering. Just as I had stopped it before, three—no, four—four times now.

They might send someone else, but they might not, and I couldn't take that chance.

I had to find the tamperer myself, and deal with him. If I couldn't find him directly, if he wasn't in this time period but later, then I might need to tamper with time myself, to change *his* past without hurting *mine.*

That's tricky, but I've done it.

I slid off the stool and stood up, gulped the rest of my drink, and laid a bill on the bar—five dollars in the currency of the day. I shrugged, straightening my coat, and I stepped out into the cool of a summer night.

Insects sang somewhere, strange insects extinct before I was born, and the streetlights pooled pale grey across the black sidewalks. I turned my head slowly, feeling the flux, feeling the shape of the time-stream, of my reality.

Downtown was firm, solid, still rooted in the past and the present and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

secure in the future. Facing in the opposite direction I felt my gut twist. I crossed the empty street to my car.

I drove out the avenues, ignoring the highways; I can't feel as well on the highways, they're too far out of the city's life-flow.

I went north, then east, and the nausea gripped me tighter with every block. It became a gnawing pain in my belly as the world shimmered and shifted around me, an unstable reality. I stopped the car by the side of the street and forced the pain down, forced my perception of the world to steady itself.

When I was ready to go on I leaned over and checked in the glove compartment. No gloves—the name was already an anachronism even in this time period. But my gun was there. Not my service weapon; that's an anachronism, too advanced. I don't dare use it. The knowledge of its existence could be dangerous. No, I had bought a gun here, in this era.

I pulled it out and put it in my coat pocket. The weight of it, that hard, metal tugging at my side, felt oddly comforting.

I had a knife, too. I was dealing with primitives, with savages, not with civilized people. These final decades of the twentieth century, with their brushfire wars and nuclear arms races, were a jungle, even in the great cities of North America. I had a knife, a good one, with a six-inch blade I had sharpened myself.

Armed, I drove on, and two blocks later I had to leave the avenue, turn onto the quiet side-streets, tree-lined and peaceful.

Somewhere, in that peace, someone was working to destroy my home, my life, my *self*.

I turned again, and felt the queasiness and pain leap within me, and I knew I was very close.

I stopped the car and got out, the gun in my pocket and my hand on the gun, my other hand holding the knife.

One house had a light in the window; the homes on either side were dark. I scanned, and I knew that that light was it, the center of the unreality—maybe not the tamperer himself, but something, a focus for the disturbance of the flow of history.

Perhaps it was an ancestor of the tamperer; I had encountered that before.

I walked up the front path and rang the bell.

I braced myself, the knife in one hand, the gun in the other.

The porch light came on, and the door started to open. I threw myself against it.

It burst in, and I went through it, and I was standing in a hallway. A man in his forties was staring at me, holding his wrist where the door had slammed into it as it pulled out of his grip. There had been no chain-bolt; my violence had, perhaps, been more than was necessary.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I couldn't take risks, though. I pointed the gun at his face and squeezed the trigger.

The thing made a report like the end of the world, and the man fell, blood and tissue sprayed across the wall behind him.

A woman screamed from a nearby doorway, and I pointed the gun at her, unsure.

The pain was still there. It came from the woman. I pulled the trigger again.

She fell, blood red on her blouse, and I looked down at her as the pain faded, as stability returned.

I was *real* again.

If the man were her husband, perhaps she was destined to remarry, or to be unfaithful—*she* would have been the tamperer's ancestor, but *he* might not have been. The twisting of time had stopped only when the woman fell.

I regretted shooting him, then, but I had had no choice. Any delay might have been fatal. The life of an individual is precious, but not as precious as history itself.

A twinge ran through my stomach; perhaps only an after-effect, but I had to be certain. I knelt, and went quickly to work with my knife.

When I was done, there could be no doubt that the two were dead, and that neither could ever have children.

Finished, I turned and fled, before the fumbling police of this era could interfere.

I knew the papers would report it the next day as the work of a lunatic, of a deranged thief who panicked before he could take anything, or of someone killing for perverted pleasure. I didn't worry about that.

I had saved history again.

I wish there were another way, though.

Sometimes I have nightmares about what I do, sometimes I dream that I've made a mistake, killed the wrong person, that I stranded myself here. What if it wasn't a mechanical failure that sent the machine into flux, what if I changed my own past and did that to myself?

I have those nightmares sometimes.

Worse, though, the very worst nightmares, are the ones where I dream that I never changed the past at all, that I never lived in any time but this one, that I grew up here, alone, through an unhappy childhood and a miserable adolescence and a sorry adulthood—that I never traveled in time, that it's all in my mind, that I killed those people for nothing.

That's the worst of all, and I wake up from that one sweating, ready to scream.

Thank God it's not true. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The monks at Ir-Ruhaiyeh did not talk casually among themselves. They were not hermits; those who wanted to be pillar-sitters like the two Saints Symeon went off into the Syrian desert by themselves and did not join monastic communities. Still, the Rule of St. Basil enjoined silence through much of the day.

Despite the Cappadocian Father's Rule, though, a whispered word ran through the monastery regardless of the canonical hour: "The Persians. The Persians are marching toward Ir-Ruhaiyeh."

The abbot, Isaac, heard the whispers, though monks had to shout when they spoke to him. Isaac was past seventy, with a white beard that nearly reached his waist. But he had been abbot here for more than twenty years, and a simple monk for thirty years before that. He knew what his charges thought almost before they thought it.

Isaac turned to the man he hoped would one day succeed him. "It will be very bad this time, John. I feel it."

The prior shrugged. "It will be as God wills, father abbot." He was half the abbot's age, round-faced, and always smiling. What would from many men have had the ring of a prophecy of doom came from his lips as a prediction of good fortune.

Isaac was not cheered, not this time. "I wonder if God does not mean this to be the end for us Christians."

"The Persians have come to Ir-Ruhaiyeh before," John said stoutly. "They raided, they moved on. When their campaigns were through, they went back to their homeland once more, and life resumed."

"I was here," Isaac agreed. "They came in the younger Justin's reign, and Tiberius', and Maurice's. As you say, they left again soon enough, or were driven off. But since this beast of a Phokas murdered his way to the throne of the Roman Empire—"

"Shh." John looked around. Only one monk was nearby, on his hands and knees in the herb garden. "One never knows who may be listening."

"I am too old to fear spies overmuch, John," the abbot said, chuckling. At that moment, the monk in the herb garden sat back on his haunches so he could wipe sweat from his strong, swarthy face with the sleeve of his robe. Isaac chuckled again. "And can you seriously imagine *him* betraying us?"

John laughed too. "That one? No, you have me there. Ever since he came to us, he's thought of nothing but his hymns."

"Nor can I blame him, for they are a gift from God," Isaac said. "Truly he must be inspired, to sing the Lord's praises so sweetly when he knew not a word of Greek before he fled his horrid paganism to become a Christian and a monk. Romanos the Melodist was a convert too, they say—born a Jew."

"Some of our brother's hymns are a match for his, I think," John said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Perhaps they love Christ the more for first discovering Him with the full faculties of grown men."

"It could be so," Isaac said thoughtfully. Then, as the monk in the garden resumed his work, the abbot came back to his worries. "When I was younger, we always knew the Persians were harriers, not conquerors. Sooner or later, our soldiers would drive them back. This time I think they are come to stay."

John's sunny face was not well adapted to showing concern, but it did now. "You may be right, father abbot. Since the general Narses rebelled against Phokas, since Germanos attacked Narses, since the Persians beat Germanos and Leontios—"

"Since Phokas broke his own brother's pledge of safe-conduct for Narses and burned him alive, since Germanos was forced to become a monk for losing to the Persians—" Isaac took up the melancholy tale of Roman troubles. "Our armies now are a rabble, those that have not fled. Who will, who can, make King Khosroes' soldiers leave the Empire now?"

John looked this way and that again, lowered his voice so that Isaac had to lean close to hear him at all. "Perhaps it would be as well if they did stay. I wonder," he went on wistfully, "if the young man with them truly is Maurice's son Theodosios. Even with Persian backing, he would be better than Phokas."

"No, John." The abbot shook his head in grim certainty. "I am sure Theodosios is dead; he was with his father when Phokas overthrew them. And while the new Emperor has many failings, no one can doubt his talent as a butcher."

"True enough," John sighed. "Well, then, father abbot, why *not* welcome the Persians as liberators from the tyrant?"

"Because of what I heard from a traveler out of the east who took shelter with us last night. He was from a village near Daras, where the Persians have had a couple of years now to decide how they will govern the lands they have taken from the Empire. He told me they were beginning to make the Christians thereabouts become Nestorians."

"I had not heard that, father abbot," John said, adding a moment later, "Filthy heresy!"

"Not to the Persians. They exalt Nestorians above all other Christians, trusting their loyalty because we who hold to the right belief have persecuted them so they may no longer live within the Empire." Isaac sadly shook his head. "All too often, that trust has proven justified."

"What shall we do, then?" John asked. "I will not abandon the true faith, but in truth I would sooner serve the Lord as a living monk than as a martyr, though His will be done, of course." He crossed himself.

So did Isaac. His eyes twinkled. "I do not blame you, my son. I have lived most of my life, so I am ready to see God and His Son face to face

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whenever He desires, but I understand how younger men might hesitate. Some, to save their lives, might even bow to heresy and forfeit their souls. I think, therefore, that we should abandon Ir-Ruhaiyeh, so no one will have to face this bitter choice."

John whistled softly. "As bad as that?" His glance slid to the monk in the garden, who had looked up at the musical tone but went back to his weeding when the prior's eye fell on him.

"As bad as that," Isaac echoed. "I need you to begin drawing up plans for our withdrawal. I want us to leave no later than a week from today."

"So soon, father abbot? As you wish, of course; you know you have my obedience. Shall I arrange for our travel west to Antioch or south to Damascus? I presume you will want us safe behind a city's walls."

"Yes, but neither of those," the abbot said. John stared at him in surprise. Isaac went on, "I doubt Damascus is strong enough to stand against the storm that is rising. And Antioch—Antioch is all in commotion since the Jews rose and murdered the patriarch, may God smile upon him. Besides, the Persians are sure to make for it, and it can fall. I was a tiny boy the last time it did; the sack, I have heard, was ghastly. I would not want us caught up in another such."

"What then, father abbot?" John asked, puzzled now.

"Ready us to travel to Constantinople, John. If Constantinople falls to the Persians, surely it could only portend the coming of the Antichrist and the last days of the world. Even that may come. I find it an evil time to be old."

"Constantinople. The city." John's voice held awe and longing. From the Pillars of Herakles to Mesopotamia, from the Danube to Nubia, all through the Roman Empire, Constantinople was *the* city. Every man dreamed of seeing it before he died. The prior ran fingers through his beard. His eyes went distant as he began to think of what the monks would need to do to get there. He never noticed Isaac walking away.

What did call him back to his surroundings was the monk leaving the herb garden a few minutes later. Had the fellow simply passed by, John would have paid him no mind. But he was humming as he walked, which disturbed the prior's thoughts.

"Silence, brother," John said reprovingly.

The monk dipped his head in apology. Before he had gone a dozen paces, he was humming again. John rolled his eyes in rueful despair. Taking the music from that one was the next thing to impossible, for it came upon him so strongly that it possessed him without his even realizing it.

Had he not produced such lovely hymns, the prior thought, people might have used the word *possessed* in a different sense. But no demon,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

surely, could bring forth glowing praise of the Trinity and the Archangel Gabriel.

John dismissed the monk from his mind. He had many more important things to worry about.

"A nomisma for that donkey, that piece of crowbait?" The monk clapped a hand to his tonsured pate in theatrical disbelief. "A goldpiece? You bandit, may Satan lash you with sheets of fire and molten brass for your effrontery! Better you should ask for thirty pieces of silver. That would only be six more, and would show you for the Judas you are!"

After fierce haggling, the monk ended up buying the donkey for ten silver pieces, less than half the first asking price. As the trader put the jingling miliaresia into his pouch, he nodded respectfully to his recent opponent. "Holy sir, you are the finest bargainer I ever met at a monastery."

"I thank you." Suddenly the monk was shy, not the fierce dickerer he had seemed a moment before. Looking down to the ground, he went on, "I was a merchant once myself, years ago, before I found the truth of Christ."

The trader laughed. "I might have known." He gave the monk a shrewd once-over. "From out of the south, I'd guess, by your accent."

"Just so." The monk's eyes were distant, remembering. "I was making my first run up to Damascus. I heard a monk preaching in the marketplace. I was not even a Christian at the time, but it seemed to me that I heard within me the voice of the Archangel Gabriel, saying, 'Follow!' And follow I did, and follow I have, all these years since. My caravan went back without me."

"A strong call to the faith indeed, holy sir," the trader said, crossing himself. "But if you ever wish to return to the world, seek me out. For a reasonable share of the profits I know you will bring in, I would be happy to stake you as a merchant once again."

The monk smiled, teeth white against tanned, dark skin and gray-streaked black beard. "Thank you, but I am content and more than content with my life as it is. *Inshallah—*" He laughed at himself. "Here I've been working all these years to use only Greek, and recalling what I once was makes me forget myself so easily. *Theou thelontos,* I should have said—God willing—I would have spent all my days here at Ir-Ruhaiyeh. But that is not to be."

"No." The trader looked east. No smoke darkened the horizon there, not yet, but both men could see it in their minds' eyes. "I may find a new home for myself as well."

"God grant you good fortune," the monk said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And you, holy sir. If I have more beasts to sell, be sure I shall look for a time when you are busy elsewhere."

"Spoken like a true thief," the monk said. They both laughed. The monk led the donkey away toward the stables. They were more crowded now than at any other time he could recall, with horses, camels, and donkeys. Some the monks would ride, others would carry supplies and the monastery's books and other holy gear.

Words and music filled the monk's mind as he walked toward the refectory. By now the words came more often in Greek than his native tongue, but this time, perhaps because his haggle with the merchant had cast memory back to the distant pagan days he did not often think of any more, the idea washed over him in the full guttural splendor of his birthspeech.

Sometimes he crafted a hymn line by line, word by word, fighting against stubborn ink and papyrus until the song had the shape he wanted. He was proud of the songs he shaped that way. They were truly his.

Sometimes, though, it was as if he saw the entire shape of a hymn complete at once. Then the praises to the Lord seemed almost to write themselves, his pen racing over the page as an instrument not of his own intelligence but rather a channel through which God spoke for Himself. Those hymns were the ones for which the monk had gained a reputation that reached beyond Syria. He often wondered if he had earned it. God deserved more credit than he did. But then, he would remind himself, that was true in all things.

This idea he had now was of the second sort, a flash of inspiration so blinding that he staggered and almost fell, unable to bear up under its impact. For a moment, he did not even know—or care—where he was. The words, the glorious words reverberating in his mind, were all that mattered.

And yet, because the inspiration came to him in his native language, his intelligence was also engaged. How could he put his thoughts into words his fellows here and folk all through the Empire would understand? He knew he had to; God would never forgive him, nor he forgive himself, if he failed here.

The refectory was dark but, filled with summer air and sweating monks, not cool. The monk took a loaf and a cup of wine. He ate without tasting what he had eaten. His comrades spoke to him; he did not answer. His gaze was inward, fixed on something he alone could see.

Suddenly he rose and burst out, "There is no God but the Lord, and Christ is His Son!" That said what he wanted to say, and said it in good Greek, though without the almost hypnotic intensity the phrase had in his native tongue. Still, he saw, it served his purpose: several monks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

glanced his way, and a couple, having heard only the bare beginning of the song, made the sacred sign of the cross.

He noticed the others in the refectory only peripherally. Only later would he realize he had heard John say in awe to the abbot Isaac, "The holy fit has taken him again."

For the prior was right. The fit had taken him, and more strongly than ever before. Words poured from somewhere deep within him: "He is the Kindly, the Merciful, Who gave His only-begotten Son that man might live. The Lord will abide forever in glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Which of the Lord's blessings would you deny?"

On and on he sang. The tiny part of him not engaged in singing thanked God for granting him what almost amounted to the gift of tongues. His spoken Greek, especially when dealing with things of the world, was sometimes halting. Yet again and again now, he found the words he needed. That had happened before, but never like this.

"There is no God but the Lord, and Christ is His Son!" Ending as he had begun, the monk paused, looking around for a moment as he slowly came back to himself. His knees failed him; he sank back to his bench. He felt drained but triumphant. The only comparison he knew was most unmonastic: he felt as he had just after a woman.

He rarely thought, these days, of the wife he had left with all else when he gave over the world for the monastery. He wondered if she still lived; she was a good deal older than he. With very human vanity, he wondered if she ever thought of him. With his own characteristic honesty, he doubted it. The marriage had been arranged. It was not her first. Likely it would not have been her last, either.

The touch of the prior's hand on his arm brought him fully back to the confines he had chosen as his own. "That was most marvelous," John said. "I count myself fortunate to have heard it."

The monk dipped his head in humility. "You are too kind, reverend sir."

"I do not think so." John hesitated, went on anxiously, "I trust—I pray—you will be able to write down your words, so those not lucky enough to have been here on this day will yet be able to hear the truth and grandeur of which you sang."

The monk laughed—again, he thought, as he might have at any small thing after going in unto his wife. "Have no fear there, reverend sir. The words I recited are inscribed upon my heart. They shall not flee me."

"May it be as you have said," the prior told him.

John did not, however, sound as though he thought it was. To set his mind at ease, the monk sang the new hymn again, this time not in the hot flush of creation but as one who brings out an old and long-familiar

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

song. "You see, reverend sir," he said when he was done. "What the Lord, the Most Bountiful One, has granted me shall not be lost."

"Now I have been present at two miracles," John said, crossing himself: "hearing your song the first time and then, a moment later, again with not one single change, not a different word, that I noticed."

With his mind, the monk felt of the texture of his creation, comparing his first and second renditions of the hymn. "There were none," he said confidently. "I would take oath to it before Christ the Judge of all."

"No need on my account. I believe you," John said. "Still, even miracles, I suppose, may be stretched too far. Therefore I charge you, go at once to the writing-chamber, and do not leave it until you have written out three copies of your hymn. Keep one yourself, give me one, and give the third to any other one of the brethren you choose."

For the first time in his life, the monk dared protest his prior's command. "But, reverend sir, I should not waste so much time away from the work of preparing for our journey to the city."

"One monk's absence will not matter so much there," John said firmly. "Do as I tell you, and we will bring to Constantinople not only our humble selves, but also a treasure for all time in your words of wisdom and prayer. That is why I bade you write out three copies: if the worst befall and the Persians overrun us, which God prevent, then one might still reach the city. And one must, I think. These words are too important to be lost."

The monk yielded. "It shall be as you say, then. I had not thought on why you wanted me to write out the hymn three times—I thought it was only for the sake of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

To his amazement, John bowed to him. "You are most saintly, thinking only of the world of the spirit. As prior, though, I have also to reckon with this world's concerns."

"You give me too much credit," the monk protested. Under his swarthy skin he felt himself grow hot, remembering how moments ago he had been thinking, not of the world to come, but of his wife.

"Your modesty becomes you," was all John said to that. The prior bowed again, discomfiting the monk even more. "Now I hope you will excuse me, for I have my work to see to. Three fair copies, mind, I expect from you. In that matter I will accept no excuses."

The monk made one last try. "Please, reverend sir, let me labor too and write later, when our safety is assured. Surely I will earn the hatred of my brethren for being idle while they put all their strength into readying us to go."

"You are not idle," John said sternly. "You are in the service of the Lord, as are they. You are acting under my orders, as are they. Only

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vicious fools could resent that, and vicious fools will have to deal with *me.*" The prior set his jaw.

"They will do as you say, reverend sir," the monk said—who could dare disobey John? "But they will do it from obedience alone, not from conviction, if you take my meaning."

"I know what you mean," the prior said, chuckling. "How could I be who I am and not know it? Here, though, you are wrong. Not a man who was in the refectory and heard your hymn will bear you any but the kindest of wills. All will be as eager as I am to have it preserved."

"I hope you are right," the monk said.

John laughed again. "How could I be wrong? After all, I am the prior." He thumped the monk on the back. "Now go on, and prove it for yourself."

With more than a little trepidation, the monk did as he had been ordered. He was surprised to find John right. Though he sat alone in the writing-chamber, from time to time monks bustling past paused a moment to lean their burdens against the wall, stick their heads in the doorway, and encourage him to get his song down on papyrus.

The words flowed effortlessly from his pen—as he'd told the prior, they truly were inscribed upon his heart. He took that to be another sign of God's speaking directly through him with this hymn. He sometimes found writing a barrier; the words that sang in his mind seemed much less fine when written out. And other times his pen could not find the right words at all, and what came from it was not the fine thing he had conceived, but only a clumsy makeshift.

Not today. When he finished the first copy, the crucial one, he compared it to what he had sung. It was as if he had seen the words of the hymn before him as he wrote. Here they were again, as pure and perfect as when the Lord had given them to him. He bent his head in thanksgiving.

He took more papyrus and began the second and third copies. Usually when he was copying, his eyes went back to the original every few words. Now he hardly glanced at it. He had no need, not today.

He was no fine calligrapher, but his hand was clear enough. After so long at Ir-Ruhaiyeh, writing from left to right had even begun to seem natural to him.

The bell rang for evening prayer. The monk noticed, startled, that the light streaming in through the window was ruddy with sunset. Had his task taken any longer, he would have had to light a lamp to finish it. He rubbed his eyes, felt for the first time how tired they were. Maybe he should have lit a lamp. He did not worry about it. Even if the light of the world was failing, the light of the Holy Spirit had sustained him while he wrote.

He took the three copies of the hymn with him as he headed for the chapel. John, he knew, would be pleased that he had finished writing in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a single afternoon. So much still remained to be done before the monks left Ir-Ruhaiyeh.

Donkeys brayed. Horses snorted. Camels groaned, as if in torment. Isaac knew they would have done the same had their loads been a single straw rather than the bales and panniers lashed to their backs. The abbot stood outside the monastery gates, watching monks and beasts of burden file past.

The leave-taking made him feel the full weight of his years. He rarely did, but Ir-Ruhaiyeh had been his home all his adult life. One does not abandon half a century and more of roots without second thoughts.

Isaac turned to John, who stood, as he so often did, at the abbot's right hand. "May it come to pass one day," Isaac said, "that the Persians be driven back to their homeland so our brethren may return here in peace."

"And may you lead that return, father abbot, singing songs of rejoicing in the Lord," John said. The prior's eyes never wandered from the gateway. As each animal and man came by, he made another check mark on the long roll of papyrus he held.

Isaac shook his head. "I am too old a tree to transplant. All other soil will seem alien to me; I shall not flourish elsewhere."

"Foolishness," John said. For all his effort, though, his voice lacked conviction. Not only was he uneasy about reproving the abbot in any way; he also feared Isaac knew whereof he spoke. He prayed both he and his superior were wrong.

"As you will." The abbot sounded reassuring—deliberately so, John thought. Isaac knew John had enough to worry about right now.

The procession continued. At last it came to an end: almost three hundred monks, trudging west in hope and fear. "Is everyone safely gone?" Isaac asked.

John consulted his list, now black with checks. He frowned. "Have I missed someone?" He shouted to the nearest monk in the column. The monk shook his head. The question ran quickly up the line, and was met everywhere with the same negative response.

John glowered down at the unchecked name, muttered under his breath. "He's off somewhere devising another hymn," the prior growled to Isaac. "Well and good—on any day but this. By your leave—" He started back into the now abandoned (or rather, all but abandoned) monastery.

"Yes, go fetch him," Isaac said. "Be kind, John. When the divine gift takes him, he forgets all else."

"I've seen," John nodded. "But even for that we have no time today, not if we hope to stay in this world so God may visit us with His gifts."

Entering Ir-Ruhaiyeh after the monks had gone out of it was like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seeing the corpse of a friend—no, John thought, like the corpse of his mother, for the monastery had nurtured and sheltered him as much as his fleshly parents. Hearing only the wind whistle through the courtyard, seeing doors flung carelessly open and left so forever, made John want to weep.

His head came up. The wind was not quite all he heard. Somewhere among the deserted buildings, a monk was singing quietly to himself, as if trying the flavor of words on his tongue.

John found him just outside the empty stables. His back was turned, so even as the prior drew near he only caught snatches of the new hymn. He was not sure he was sorry. This song seemed to be the complement of the one the monk had created in the refectory; instead of praise for the Lord, it told of the pangs of hell in terms so graphic that ice walked John's back.

"For the unbelievers, for the misbelievers, the scourge. Their hearts shall leap up and choke them. Demons shall seize them by feet and forelocks. Seething water shall be theirs to drink, and—" The monk broke off abruptly, jumping in surprise as John's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Come, Mouamet," the prior said gently. "Not even for your songs will the Persians delay. Everyone else has gone now; we wait only on you."

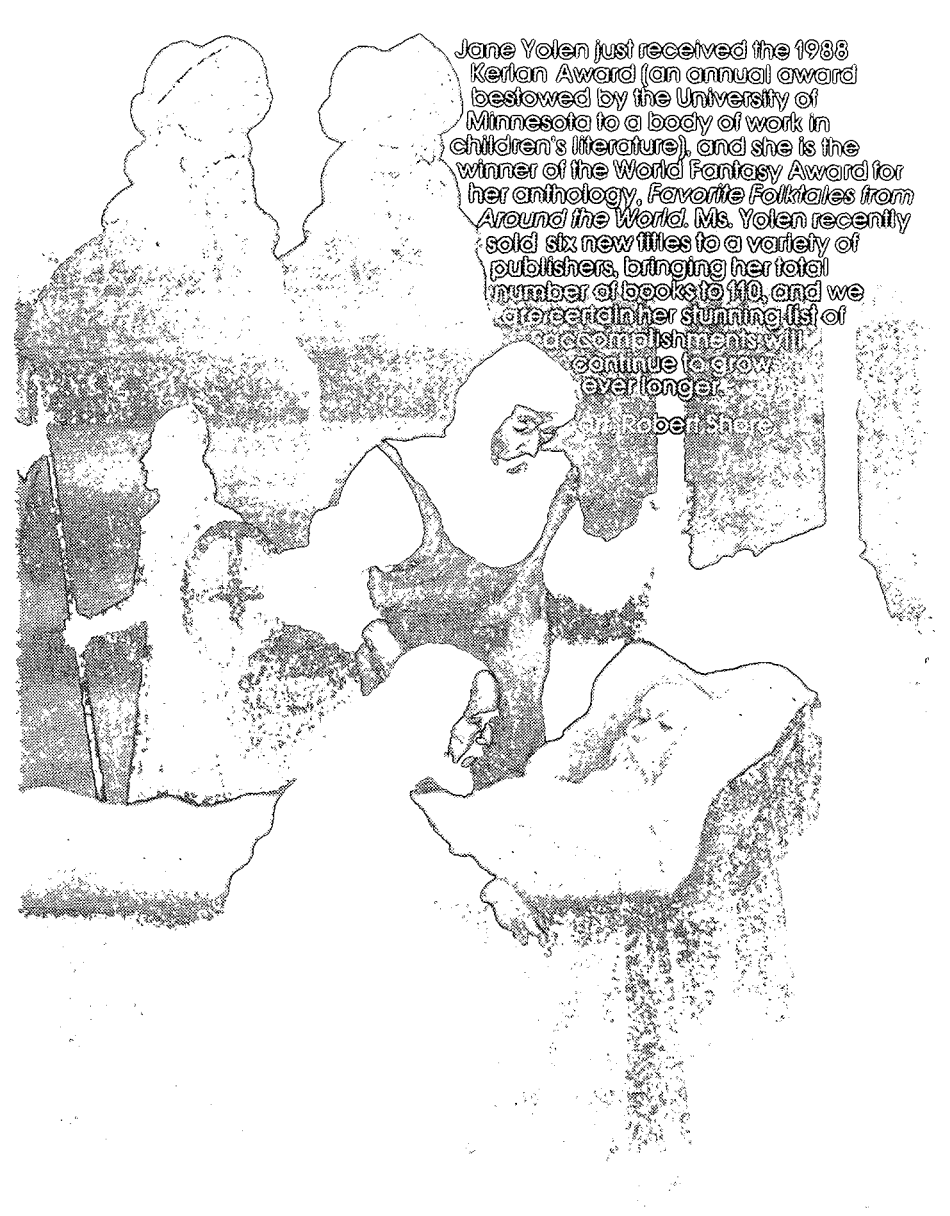
For a moment, he did not think the monk saw him. Then Mouamet's face cleared. "Thank you, reverend sir," he said. "With the Lord giving me this hymn, I'd forgotten the hour." The abstracted expression that raised awe in John briefly returned. "I think I shall be able to recover the thread."

"Good," the prior said, and meant it. "But now—"

"—I'll come with you," Mouamet finished for him. Sandals scuffing in the dust, they walked together out of the monastery and set out on the long road to Constantinople. ●

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *IAsfm* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the ZIP codes for both, please!) to our subscription department: Box 1933, Marion OH 43306.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Jane Yolen just received the 1988 Kerlan Award (an annual award bestowed by the University of Minnesota to a body of work in children's literature), and she is the winner of the World Fantasy Award for her anthology, *Favorite Folktales from Around the World*. Ms. Yolen recently sold six new titles to a variety of publishers, bringing her total number of books to 110, and we are certain her stunning list of accomplishments will continue to grow ever longer.

—Robert Shore

by Jane Yolen

FEAST OF SOULS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The old man is lying under a white cloak with a large red cross emblazoned. Kneeling by his bed is a younger version of himself, a dark-haired, hawk-nosed man, eyes carmined with weeping. The bed is large and hung with heavy wine-colored curtains, but they are pulled back to let in air and light. The old man needs all the air and light he can get. He no longer eats anything but a little mushroom crumbled in a bowl, sprinkled with fresh-baked bread. And white wine. Red is too strong, he has told them. It fires the blood.

There are always watchers in the bedroom now, the vigils set by those who love him best, those who expect the most from him. His son, this strong-beaked survivor, has organized the relays. John d'Erley and Thomas Basset are there most often, by their own requests. But it is the son, the Younger as he is called by his mother and those of parallel quality, for he bears his father's name, who takes the most perilous watch. Wrapped in his silken gown, the squirrel collar soon to be replaced by his father's sable, he sits late at night by the bed. His is the midnight watch, those times when the Devil is most likely to prowl and Death to visit.

Because we do not wish to be confused with those small demons that men are prone to number and to shun, we never visit the dying at night. We come to the bedsides at less vulnerable times. We *wish* to be seen. We *wish* to be known. To be counted, catalogued, wondered at. That is our charge, after all. We are the harbingers. We are the messengers. We sow a people's God that we may reap the harvest of their souls. How else to feed on this alien earth?

That is why the Monday before Ascension, during the day, we show ourselves to Earl Marshal as he lies dying. There is no satiety in feasting on small souls. We look for the men of nexus, the turning points of history, the great foci. And these we know from the histories. Not the ones writ centuries after, but the *chansons* and ballads, the journals and logs set down by the ones who loved them best and count their loss the greatest.

We knew from the histories that the earl's dying would be a long, slow progress. What began at Candlemas would last a full two months and more, taking him to Marlborough Castle, to Westminster, thence riding down his pain to London Tower where he would wait, besieged behind the thick walls, as if waiting for some final charge by Death's minions. But then he retreated once again, this time by slow water to his manor in Caversham. Death, our brother, followed.

But we went before. In this eternity of feasting, we always go before. Death reads the histories, even as do we. He knows the times and the places, though he cannot come before time. He must hope to harvest

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what we have not yet happened upon. There are two of us and only one of him but he is a glutton. We are tasters; he takes all.

In 1219, in Earl Marshal's dark bedroom, we wear white so he may have no trouble discerning us in the gloom.

His son is begging him to eat. "We are certain," he says to his father in a voice he would never have used if the old man were not now permanently abed, "it will do you good." Just as reported in the histories.

The arrival of eternity has softened the earl. A man who captured some five hundred knights in his lifetime of tournies, who sired five sons and five daughters upon a wealthy, willing wife, he is not used to listening to the importunings of his children, especially not to one called all his life The Younger. Still the earl has been made kind in this last crisis, in case he has to justify these last words to his god.

"Then for that," he answers in a voice made husky by fever, "I shall eat as much as I can." The histories are always word-perfect in these pasts. Perhaps it is that memory is greater when letters are not learned. Perhaps we reconstruct history out of story by traveling back in time. Perhaps our hunger for the feast of souls lets us listen with lenient ears. There are many *perhapses* that can be fashioned over centuries of feasting.

The Younger leaves to get the food, relieved, yet fearful that food really *will* sustain his father in his long dying. The squirrel collar tickles his neck, reminding him that it is not yet sable. The servants do not lower their eyes as quickly to him as they will when he is master.

Two men, the estimable John d'Erley, who has given up mansions and marriage to remain Marshal's squire, bound to him by the kind of love that men in this time enjoy but do not name, and Thomas Basset, that consummate cipher, raise the earl up so that he may sit while eating.

Basset leaves the room to collect the food from The Younger's own hands. There is still fear of poisoning; someone might want to hasten the Flower of Chivalry to his death. He must not be rushed before time.

D'Erley slips his hand behind the earl's back. The touch comforts them both, though neither will admit it. Especially d'Erley, who has more to lose by such an admission, having neither wife nor child nor cleric's collar to save him from calumnies.

I show myself to the earl, as does my companion. The white of our robes gleams in the dim lumens. He cannot count our limbs nor make out the contours of our faces. It would not do to let him really see our eyes. Hence the white robes.

Earl Marshal may be startled, but he is too old a hand at the uncanny and the unusual to do more than blanch. Even as a child he was able to disguise his fears, joking with King Stephen's hangmen when they threatened him. Or perhaps he is now too weak to respond. He waits

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

until the cloth is laid and the soup bowl with the mushrooms and bread set before him. He waits until the cipher Basset leaves the room again, for only d'Erley will he allow to feed him, to see him in his ultimate weakness. It is d'Erley, alone, who wipes his bowels and changes the towels kept between his legs to stanch the flow which he can no longer control.

Basset leaves and the earl turns his head slightly, speaking in a whisper to d'Erley, who must put his head down next to the old man's mouth in order to hear. The earl does this for a reason, knowing how much d'Erley is comforted and discomforted by the closeness of their connection. However, he does not realize that his breath stinks, a compote of age and decay. If he did, it would discomfort *him*, for he was ever a meticulous man.

But d'Erley, blinkered, can see nothing but the old man's covers, the red cross, the plate.

"Do you see what I see?" Marshal asks. Since d'Erley does not at first understand him, the earl is forced to repeat it twice more, weakening with each word.

"My Lord, I do not know what that might be," d'Erley says, sure it is Death the earl sees, has seen these past two months. But he is early in his assessment by days. My brother is busy elsewhere, reaping still in the sands around Jerusalem and in the deltas of Africa, in London's awful slums.

"By my soul," the earl says, the confession strong in his mouth, the very word exciting us to a fresh brilliance, "I see two men in white, one is beside me on the right, the other on the left. Nowhere have I seen men so fine."

Having been properly observed, we allow ourselves to fade away. Not men, of course. There are but three of us in all the universe, and though I say "brother" it is but a convenience, a nod to the sexing of language in this world. We wear no gender. We do not reproduce. We are three and we are one, together, forever.

But the earl, though he has seen us, he sees us as he would have us, not as we are. Besides, in his old age he has developed problems with his vision, seeing rather less well than did his father, who lost an eye at the convent of Wherewhell when the melting lead of a fired roof dripped directly upon his face. We were neither to the earl's left nor his right, but rather hovering over his great bed.

But he had seen what he was meant to see, what the history says he saw. Witnessing, he passes it on, impressing it upon d'Erley whose memory will serve as the maker of the *chanson*. Thus is the loop of history preserved.

D'Erley answers, "My Lord, thus there come to you a company that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

will lead you in the true way," neglecting to ask for more details from the man he worships, loves, fears. It is just as well. Details would only serve to confuse. Only the angels of Revelations have eyes all around and within, in front and behind. D'Erley will task himself with this neglect for years to come, and that, too, will go into his history.

So we pass from the scene, my brother and I, through the thick stone walls of Caversham, over the lead roof, into the darkening night sky where a single moon lends its feeble light. We give little thought to our other brother who will pass this way a few days hence only to discover how meager are our leavings. They will be rinsed well with rose water, stiffening in a chamber already stripped of its possessions by the earl himself, giving away his gowns and gold for the good of a soul which he no longer owns. Yet he has us to thank for so quiet and peaceful an end. It is only the ones we cannot find loving history for who die in agony, like Marshal's first master, Henry Plantagenet, devoured by the disease that first seized him by the heel. He was forced by our brother to drag himself around his rooms like some poor, miserable beast, moaning until the end when the clotted blood fell from his mouth and nose and he lay quite alone.

We never dwell on our failures or our brother's successes. In truth we do not understand them. None of us recalls the beginning, only this endless circuit, this cosmic encircling, this treadmill of souls. Each year we discover another song, another story brought down through the ages that smells of truth, and ride its memory back through the years, though we have been confused more than once. Humans are consummate actors in the camera's eye. Sometimes it is a true memory and then we do feast. More often there is a false trail, and then there is famine.

Perhaps some day we will even claim Henry Plantagenet's soul, finding a history left by Eleanor, who once loved him, though certainly his sons did not. Then we could bring his dying a little peace. He might even rest his last days in a bed, brought mushrooms and wine by a beloved counselor, and we would shine on him with our white robes. Or, if he preferred, halos and harps; we could provide those.

But that is another *perhaps* and foolish of me to maunder so. Besides, we are planning our next besiegement, for a scholar has recently discovered an account of the life and death of Arthur's only son, written by the one who loved him, his devouring mother, the Fey. There are only twenty-seven parchment leaves, written in a strange Gaelic, and two leaves are missing. But each leaf contains two columns of forty lines. If it is true, it promises to be quite a feast. And in our turn, we promise to give him a quiet, soulless ending.

Selah. ●

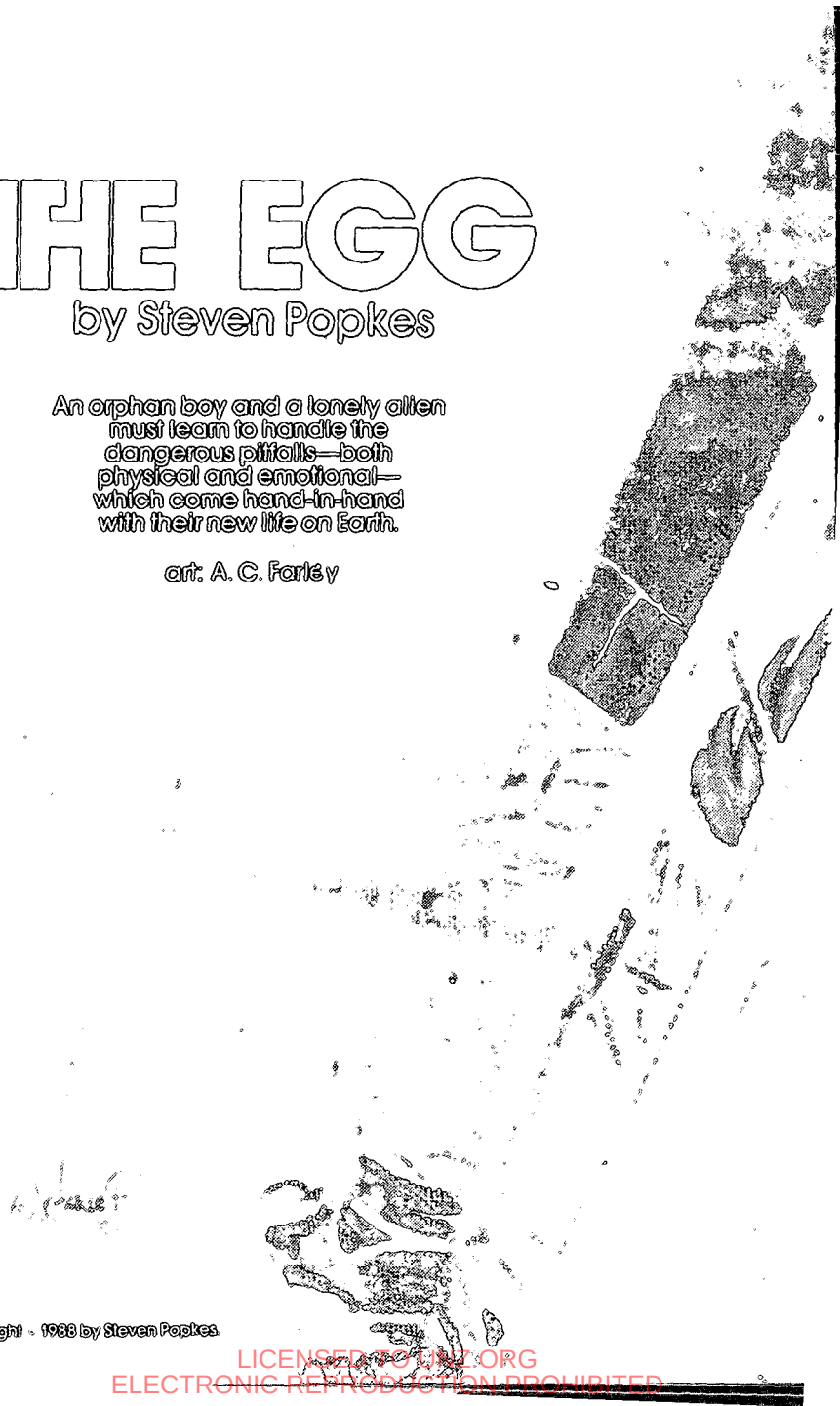
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE EGG

by Steven Popkes

An orphan boy and a lonely alien must learn to handle the dangerous pitfalls—both physical and emotional—which come hand-in-hand with their new life on Earth.

art: A. C. Farley



Copyright © 1988 by Steven Popkes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The rusty, pitted steel was soft but sharp as a knife. It was thirty or forty feet back to the beach. I didn't really want to climb back down; I didn't even have to look to convince myself. I knew how far it was. I tried rehearsing things I could say to my Aunt Sara: "Once I got that high, I had to keep going. It was too far to get back down" or "I was just trying to go up a little ways, but then I got stuck." I shook my head. Didn't wash. She'd never *told* me not to come here, but the wreck was the kind of thing she thought eleven-year-old boys Should Not Mess With.

Wasn't my home anyway.

I stretched my neck trying to see over the hull to the upper deck. I'd seen the wreck with Aunt Sara's binoculars a couple of weeks before. Well, Gray'd seen it and pointed it out to me. *I'd* needed the binoculars, not him. His eyes are a lot sharper than people's eyes. It had taken me a couple of weeks to figure out how to get over here—two condemned bridges and an old mud flat's worth of time.

It was a big ferry, forty meters if it was anything. It was called the *Hesperus*—I'd got that much from my cousin Jack before he decided I was too young to talk to. I stood there and looked at it. The pontoons had of course collapsed and rotted away—the wreck had been there about five or six years. There were broken tubes all over like so many snakes. These were the pressure fittings to fill up the pontoons, I think. Some of the blue and white paint was still showing in places on the housings, and where the brass fittings were still there and not all corroded and crumbled by the salt, you could still see a little yellow shine. It must have looked grand, running passengers and cars across the harbor, maybe pulling the whistle at some of the larger ships going up to Maine, or over to Europe or Africa—the kind of thing I'd read about happening on earth since I was a little kid.

I heard sort of a whisper from the beach and looked down. It was Mama. She stood on the sand staring at me, eyes frowned and crinkled at the edges, the way mothers get when they're worried. You know. She'd done that even when she was alive.

I said, "You worry too much, Mama." I looked up again. It wasn't that far. I looked back to the ground to tell her that but she was gone. I wished she'd stay in one place for a while.

I kept my balance by holding the edge of a warped hull plate. The ledge was narrow, rotting like an old log, but it carried me over the pontoon housings. The wind blew from inland. It went right through my jacket. Cold. I shivered like I was almost dead—the way the swamp miners shake when they cough back home. Home. That was something. This was supposed to be home, now. All my life I'd heard how good it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was going to be on earth. Well, you could have had earth as far as I was concerned. It wasn't worth a dog's hind leg to me.

The upper hull wasn't crumbling like the housings, but it was slick from the greasy harbor water. I'd heard tell of the Boston Harbor Cleanup, but I didn't believe in it.

The wreck had two bridge towers. One of the automobile gates had fallen inward and the other was held up by just one rusty hinge. It was so heavy it didn't move with the wind. But, sometimes, it made these echoing cracks like gunfire a long way off. Let me tell you. I know what guns sound like.

The inside of the ferry was a hollow cave that smelled like the sea at low tide. You know the smell? I didn't, then. It's like something died and was pickled in gasoline. I followed this dark stairway from the auto bay to the passenger deck. You could see Boston from there, the domes looked like the foggy blue crystals Mama had on the shelf at home. I don't know what happened to them. They must have been auctioned off to pay for my ticket here. Anyway, the high buildings were just a bunch of sticks. I could see the boats just outside of Revere. I shaded my eyes but I couldn't pick out Aunt Sara's.

On the inland side of the wreck, I found a narrow little ladder that looked like it went up to the bridge. It shook some when I started to climb it, but I thought it was okay.

Halfway up, the ladder shifted. I stopped.

"Don't do this to me," I said softly. "I got enough problems."

The ladder creaked again.

"I said don't!"

The old rivets popped out of the hull. I grabbed on as hard as I could. Slow as a dream, the ladder pulled away from the hull and I began to fall. I cried out.

The ladder stopped in mid-air. I choked on the yell and looked down.

Gray stood below me, two arms holding the ladder, four arms holding the hull and the remaining two ready to catch me. I grinned and relaxed. "Hey there!" I called down to him.

Gray pushed the ladder back against the hull. "Ira, come down."

"I want to look at the bridge."

"It is not safe."

"You're here now, right? You're not going to let anything happen to me."

Gray considered for a moment. He didn't move at all when he did that, just stood still as a big, gray leather rock. "True. Go to the top of the ladder and stand on the ledge. I will follow."

I climbed to the top and stood away from the edge. Gray ripped the ladder entirely away from the boat and threw it over the side. Then, he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

leaped the thirty or forty feet to the upper deck and sat down to keep from bumping his head.

When he was alive, Papa described Gray like this:

"Well, he's huge, close to nine feet tall and a quarter ton in weight. You can't think of him as a whole, but only in pieces. Like, he's got the body of a bear but with these overlapping plates of leather of a rhino. His limbs are thick like the legs of an elephant, blunt at the end but with maybe a dozen small fingers, as hard and supple as the legs of a spider. His head is scaled to the rest of him with two wide-set eyes and a little mouth in the center, like the face of a buffalo. There are bumps and protrusions around his face that belong to nothing on earth.

"He's not ugly—in fact, he's kind of beautiful—but he's strange."

I don't know whether he's strange or not—I grew up with him and he always looked normal to me. But that part about the animals is right. I looked them up myself.

"This relic is dangerous," he said. "I wish you had invited me."

I looked away and felt a little guilty. "I wanted to see it for myself."

Gray was silent a moment. "Just so. I had forgotten you are getting older. You must use your own judgment, of course. Should I go?"

I leaned against him. His hard body was cold for a minute, but as I lay there, it grew warmer and softer. Gray was all the home I needed. Which was good, since I didn't have one anymore. "No. It'll be more fun with somebody to talk to." And Aunt Sara wouldn't be able to yell at me. "Let's look at the bridge."

The windows were broken and there were these different-sized holes in the boards where the instruments had been. Gray didn't say anything while I looked but followed me down the other side to the passenger compartments. There, the top had caved in and the open space was sunny. Pieces of metal and wire and chain were all over the floor. Old mattresses and rags were piled up against the walls. "Looks like dynamite in a mattress factory," I said and giggled.

"Adolescents' parties, perhaps." Gray pointed to one wall. "Look at the graffiti."

I nodded but I wasn't much interested. There was a crazy smell here, sour-sharp like ammonia or lemons. I had never smelled anything like it, and it made me curious. Rags were piled against the bundle of chains in the corner and the smell seemed to come from there. I reached toward the pile and Gray stopped me.

"Wait a moment," said Gray.

I held back. He never did anything without a reason. He's funny that way—not like people, you see. He always knows what he's doing.

He delicately pulled apart the rags. In the center was an egg the size of a basketball.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Huh." I stared at the egg. It was wrinkled gray, with smears of yellow and red on the sides.

"What kind of egg is it?" I leaned over Gray's arm.

"I have no idea."

"It could be anything!"

Gray nodded.

"It could be dragons. Or griffins." Gray just looked at me. I grinned at him. "Well, okay. It *could* be aliens nobody has ever heard of. It could take us somewhere." Somewhere different. Better.

"The universe is a large place. It could be many things."

"Can we hatch it?"

Gray replaced the rags, then turned to me. "If you wish."

The sun was getting low. I could feel the chill in the wind. The cold might be bad for the egg. Dragons. Griffins. Gray never said there weren't any; just that they were hard to find. "Should we take it back to Aunt Sara's boat? It's going to get cold here."

Gray was silent. "It was put here on purpose. Something thinks this is the best place for it."

That made sense. "I'll come back and check it tomorrow."

Gray stood. "It is getting late. We should go back."

"Okay."

Gray helped me down the side of the wreck and walked beside me. "Ira," he said suddenly.

"Yes."

"Let me come with you when you visit the egg."

I shrugged. You could trust Gray. You could trust him with anything. "All right." We walked on a little further. I felt cold and tired. "Carry me?"

Gray did not answer but picked me up and held me close against his belly with a middle set of arms. Gray's belly grew warm and I got sleepy. For a second, I thought I could hear my mother but it was just a night bird.

"'Mama was watching me climb the wreck."

"Did she say anything?"

I shrugged. "No. She was just worried." I liked the feel of Gray's arm, the muscles under the thick leather. Like elephants or rhinos. I'd seen pictures, like I said before. "I miss them."

"I do, too."

I could see Papa walking next to Gray. Then it got too dark, but I could still hear him walking. I felt sad and sleepy and about to cry. "Papa?"

I don't think he heard me, but in a minute he began to sing:

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
alive as you and me,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I said Joe Hill you're ten years dead,
I never died, said he.

He used to sing that to me at night, when I couldn't sleep.

Gray was quiet. I snuggled deep into his arms. I felt warm and safe and I didn't feel I had to cry for a while. Pretty soon, I fell asleep.

Damn.

Sara Monahan hated boats.

Boats wobbled, wiggled, and writhed to the beating of the sea. Boats were dirty. Boats smelled.

She cut the motor in the dory and let it drift the last five or six meters to the dock. It was time enough for her to light a cigarette and cough, ready the line and toss it over the cleat on the dock and pull the dory in. She didn't think about it. Sara Monahan had been a boat person all her life, first when she was born on the eve of the 2005 stock market crash and her father had spent their last savings on the boat hoping that it would be cheaper to keep up than a house. Then, she had grown into a young girl in the flooded city of Hull, amidst the squalor of *that* place. Sara shuddered at the memory. She'd never blamed the police when they bombed it, just her father when he wouldn't leave and her mother for siding with him.

They'd never made it out of the firestorm.

She'd dragged Roni wailing to the dory and gunned the ancient motor, praying it wouldn't die and gotten out just ahead of the police fighters. Sara and Roni had kept watch at the casualty lists in the refugee camps for nearly a year just in case. Nothing.

Screw Boston. Screw the police.

They'd made their way to Revere. Sara had scraped by studying for the welding certification exams and started work laying steel in the new building boom. Roni had boned up on the merchant marine and had emigrated as soon as she had passed. They'd barely written to each other for fourteen years.

Christ.

She looked up suddenly. It was nearly sunset. Never get anywhere if she kept thinking like this. She smelled her singed hair and the burnt metal on her jacket. A shower. She thought about Roni and Roni's kid: Ira. And Ira's nanny: Gray.

She groaned and got out on the dock. It rocked—Lord how she hated things that rocked. She boarded and clambered inside the *Hercules*. Sara threw her mask into a chair and leaned against the hull, waiting to see in the gloom. Nobody here. You could tell an empty boat. Something in the way it moved.

There was a grubby note from her son Jack that he'd gone to Kendall's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for the night. Great. First a long drink, *then* shower. She coughed again. A photograph on the wall attracted her attention. It was Roni and her husband Gilbert on their wedding day. Sara opened the bottle and stared at the picture for a long minute. Gilbert was a little fat and wore glasses.

She upended the bottle and took a long drink, turned back to the photograph.

"I have better taste in men than you do, honey," she said to Roni. "Look at that guy. I've seen better faces on kitchen doors."

But mine stayed, her sister seemed to answer. *He didn't leave me pregnant with a son. Where is Mike now?*

"God knows, Roni." Sara drank some more from the bottle. "But when he touched you, you remembered it. Could you say the same?"

Roni didn't answer.

Just as well. If Roni could still talk, the first thing Sara would have asked was: where did she dig Gray up?

"Sara?"

"I'm not here." She stared at Roni. How come you look so miserably happy? You're dead.

"It's Sam."

Sam?

"Sam!" She capped the bottle and looked out on deck. There he was, little and bald and bearded. "Damn you for a fish. Sam! I haven't seen you all summer."

Sam grinned at her. "Been out to George's Bank, fishing. Just got in this morning. Came over to see how you were."

"We're fine." She grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. "You're just in time to save me from drinking alone."

One eyebrow cocked at her. "A young woman like you drinking alone? Shameful. I'll have to help. I'm civilized. I need a coffee cup to drink from."

"Bless you." She laughed.

They sat at the galley table, the bottle between them.

Sam nodded towards the dock. "Where is everybody? It's all empty slips."

Sara shrugged. "Looking for work, mostly. I was lucky to get a job in town. Most of them took off for Marblehead or Quincy—some new buildings, some dock work." Sara was almost giddy with the drinks she'd had earlier and with seeing Sam. "It's good to see you. I've been here mostly by myself this summer. Me and the kids."

Again, the eyebrow. "Kids? Have you been naughty?"

She grinned at him. "Hardly." Then she remembered and the smile left her. "It's bad news, Sam. It happened while you were away. My sister and her husband—well, they got caught in one of the union riots on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Maxwell Station." Sara smiled faintly and shrugged. "Her kid and his—nanny, I guess—came to live with me."

Sam took her hands. "Sara. I am so sorry."

"Yeah." She turned back into the galley. "It happens all the time, right? To other people." Sara shook her head. "I still can't believe it, you know? It's been months but I keep expecting them to show up." She lifted a hand and let it fall, helplessly. She shrugged and looked at him, gripped his hands hard. "But it's good to see you, Sam."

They shared the bottle.

Sam looked around. "Where are they?"

Sara scratched her hair. To hell with a shower. It was worth it to see Sam. She lit a cigarette from her previous one. Sam watched her without comment. "Jack's over to Kendall's staying the night. Ira's out with Gray."

"His nanny?"

She giggled. "Yeah. Nine feet tall and looks like a rhino with eight legs. My sister got Ira an *alien* nanny."

"Jesus."

He looked owl-like with the twilight reflecting off his big eyes.

"Jesus," he said again. "It must have been crazy on Maxwell Station."

"Crazy enough to kill them both."

"Don't talk that way."

She took the bottle and killed the last of the rum. "You don't know what it's like. I—Roni was my sister. She went off and we didn't talk much, but still—now, she's gone off and got herself killed."

Sam shrugged. "It was pretty bad there. I read they had something called rotlung—"

She ignored him. "So I get this stupid telex from the staff at Maxwell Station that Gilbert and Roni had died in the 'disturbances.' I had to claim their bodies. I had to sign for them like a goddamn parcel post. And for Ira. And for Gray. And then, the funeral." Gray hulking over the mourners, always seeming to reproach her. Ira huddled against his legs, taking comfort. The tears started to fall down her face. "I'da sent him packing. But he's in the will. Do you understand that? I have to keep him or I don't get Roni and Gilbert's estate." She shrugged. "Not much, anyway. But it's a little bit."

Sam reached across the table and took her hand. She stopped as if struck. What am I talking about? She smiled at him, embarrassed, and shook her head. "I'm a little drunk, Sam."

"Hush, Sara. It's all right."

She suddenly realized she was crying and wiped her face in her hands. "Jesus, Sam. I'm sorry."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sam sat in shadow now. She could only see the faint shine of his eyes. "It's all right."

They were silent a long minute, then Sara withdrew her hand. "Know anything about aliens, Sam?"

"Not a thing."

She stood up and got them both glasses of soda. Enough drinking for a bit. Sam didn't protest.

"Well," she sipped the soda. The bubbles tickled her nose and she had to stop herself from sneezing. "Gray's a spatien. I haven't been able to find out much about them. They're supposed to be great workers, but they don't hang around much in this neck of the woods. Not enough work, I guess. All I know about Gray is that Roni and Gilbert found him somewhere out there, and now he's theirs."

Sam shrugged. "I don't know anything about it. There are lots of aliens in Boston, though. They're all cleared and called safe, anyway. Gray must be cleared, too."

"I suppose. I wish I knew more about him."

Sam smiled at her. "Roni trusted him with her kid. That's something."

Sara nodded.

Sam opened his mouth to speak but they heard a heavy tread on the dock. In a moment, the *Hercules* shuddered as Gray stepped on board. He was carrying Ira, asleep. The cabin was so low he had to shift Ira up two sets of arms and walk in on the lower three sets to fit.

"He's asleep," Gray said quietly.

Sara nodded. The bottle was out and she felt in the wrong, as she always did in front of Gray. When Gray took Ira into the boys' room she opened the port and tossed the bottle out into the water. It was stupid, but it made her feel better.

Gray came back out into the little galley. "Is there anything for me to do?" he said in a low voiced rumble.

"No," she whispered. Why was she always whispering? "No," she said more loudly."Where you been all day?"

"We investigated a wreck near here."

A wreck. "Christ. You were looking at the *Hesperus?* That thing's twenty years old. It's dangerous. I wouldn't let my own kid go there. Nor Ira.You leave that thing alone. You hear me?"

"I hear you." Gray nodded slowly and went back outside. They heard him make his way to the bow and lie down.

Sam and Sara looked at one another for a minute or more.

"Ah, I see," said Sam. "Well, it's not like it's anything Jack didn't do, too."

"I know. But with the two of them out there—it's scary. It's been like that all summer." Roni, she thought. Poor Roni, though it was obscure

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to her why she felt sorry for Roni, whether it was because she was dead or because she had lived with Gray.

"Look," began Sam. "My dock's all filled with strangers. People from New York and Jersey. Let me come over here—you wouldn't be so alone and I wouldn't be surrounded by strangers."

She looked at him. It was like the breath of home to her. "Sam, I would like that."

"Good. I'll be here tomorrow." He stood up. "I have to go—got a new job tomorrow."

She nodded sleepily to him, stood and followed him to the dock. She called good-bye to him.

When she turned around, the moon had risen. She saw Gray was dark and motionless against the silvered deck, the shrouds and lines like so much spider webbing. Sara passed by him and he did not stir.

Mama was sitting next to my bed when I woke up. She touched my forehead and that startled me awake. "Hi," she said softly. "How are you feeling?"

"Lonely. I went out to the wreck because of that. Were you very worried?"

"Not too much. Gray was there."

"Yeah." I rubbed my eyes. "Are you coming back soon?"

"I can't come back. You know that."

"You're here, aren't you?"

She smiled at me and didn't answer. I smiled back a little bit. I couldn't help it when she did that.

"I miss you." I felt like I wanted to cry again.

"I miss you, too. Are you being a good boy like I told you? How is Gray?"

I wasn't sure so I just shrugged. "You know how he is. It's hard to tell what he's thinking."

"What do you think he's thinking?"

"I don't know." I shrugged again. "I don't think he likes Aunt Sara. She doesn't like him."

"Oh." She looked thoughtful. "You be sure you take care of Gray."

"Mama." I grinned at her. "Gray takes care of me! You have to come back to take care of him."

"I told you. I can't. Will you take care of him?"

It didn't seem like that was the way it would be, but I was willing. "Okay."

Then, she was gone and Aunt Sara knocked at the door.

"Honey?" Aunt Sara opened the door and looked inside. "Were you talking to somebody?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She coughed like Mama. For a moment, it was almost as if Mama had come back for good. But I smelled the cigarette smoke instead of the sweet swamp smell and knew it was just Aunt Sara coughing from that and not Mama coughing up like she did just before bed, back home. I didn't want to talk to her right then. So I pretended I was asleep. I could see she watched me for a long time, then closed the door and went off to bed herself.

Jack came back early in the morning before she left. He was a quick boy, slick in his movements, getting by on a wink and a grin. He was easy about most things. Sara watched him as he came on the dock towards the *Hercules,* whistling. She couldn't help grinning. Mike had been exactly the same way: wild Irish good looks, a quick grin. When he had touched her. . . .

She shook her head. Mike had left fourteen years ago.

"Hey, ma."

"Hey, kid. How was Kendall?"

"Okay. Got any food around here?"

She nodded. "Gray still outside?"

"I didn't check." He rummaged around in a cupboard and brought out an apple. "When are we going to get rid of that creep?"

"Don't talk about him that way."

Jack stared at the ceiling and rolled his eyes. Sara laughed, looked at the clock. "Christ. I've got to get to work.You take care, now."

Sara grabbed her welding helmet from the hook on the door and dashed down the dock. As she reached the dory, there was an eruption of water next to it. She stifled a scream and backed away.

Gray held onto the dock and looked up at her. "Sorry."

"Christ on a stick." She stepped into the dory."What the hell are you doing here?"

"Repairing the dock."

"Christ on a stick!" She gunned the motor and shot away towards Boston.

The Citibank building was not even half done; there were another three hundred stories to go.

The wind howled through the steel I-beams like a wolf. She grinned as she walked over the girders to the corner where she had left her torch. Over them, the crane crouched spider-like. It served as crane, resting space and the building's spine all at once. When the building's frame was finished, the top of the crane—the cab, pulleys, and gears—would be dismantled and shipped to another site. The crane's frame would remain forever part of the building. Her part of the job, welding the I-beams into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

place, would be finished in a month or so: the steel only went to the hundred and fiftieth floor. After that, it would be composites.

She liked being up here, building the bare bones of the building. People had been building and tearing down in Boston forever. Fitzpatrick, the union boss, was the seventh Fitzpatrick in the steelman's union. Christ, she thought. What must that feel like? Your father, your grandfather, every Fitzpatrick stretching back towards the Civil War. Maybe further. It was like a long chain—God! She'd love that feeling, to be tied to a family like that, to have brothers and uncles and sisters—

"Hey, Sara!"

Sara was so startled she almost lost her balance, something that hadn't happened to her in ten years. She turned and saw Sam walking across the girders towards her. "*This* is your new job?" she cried.

"You bet!"

"Great!"

He winked at her as he looped a safety line over the far corner. Sam held thumb and forefinger together and waved it to her, then pulled himself up over the top support beam.

Maybe her luck was changing. She leaned against a corner and looked down on Boston. It was a bright, sunny day. The light was broken and refracted and reflected by so many glass buildings it was hard to see exactly where the sun was. She liked the crazy quilt mirrors around her. Maybe Sam would like it, too.

Fitzpatrick shouted over to them and pointed down. Below them, the first I-beam of the shift was being brought up from the street. A few men with sledgehammers made ready to pound it in when it reached them. Sam moved away towards the crane team where he was working. She smiled after him and cranked up the torch.

Jack was in the kitchen when I got up. He grunted when I came out. I didn't like him much. I guess he felt the same way. He reminded me of the supervisor's kids back home. They always looked like they could get anything they wanted. They were always clean—or if they got dirty, it was something that washed off. Not like that gray gunk that made up the marsh around the station. It took alcohol to get that stuff off and then the smell made you sick. They stayed on the boardwalk. We stayed in the marsh. That was the way it was.

I only remember the Station. Gray tells me he and Papa and Mama were living on the Platform that orbits Maxwell Station until I was two or three, but we couldn't get enough work. That was where the station crew found Gray. He and Mama hit it off from the first—Papa, too. I wouldn't know: it was before I was born. The work went bust when I was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

born and a little while later we moved down on the station. My first memories are of the marsh.

Papa always said what a bad place it was. And it was, I guess. It was wet all the time, and there were slugs the size of your head that would take a bite out of you if you weren't careful. The air was different, too. It seemed you could never get quite enough to breathe—though everybody said the air was just fine. One thing you can say about earth: the air is good.

But the place was good, too. You could get away from people in the marsh. You could fish and swim. It was quiet—here there's always this kind of a rumble from the city.

Anyway, Jack didn't say anything to me when I got up. He barely moved out of my way when I went out on deck to look for Gray. I wanted to tell him not to say anything about the wreck. Gray's good, but he won't keep a secret unless you tell him. He's dumb that way.

He wasn't on deck and I didn't see him around the *Hercules* so I went back inside.

"Have you seen Gray anywhere?" I tried to be polite.

Jack didn't say anything. He yanked open the refrigerator and pulled out some milk.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you. I'm not deaf."

"Have you seen him?"

He looked at me. "I don't know where the creep is."

At home, I'd have gone for him right then. But, at home, nobody'd ever thought to call Gray a creep. I didn't belong here. I never did. I never will.

He looked at me like I was a bug. "You're a creep, too. Why don't you leave? Huh? Asshole. I want my fucking life back. Leave us—we were okay until you got here."

I wanted to cry. "Maybe I will," I shouted and ran out of the boat, across the dock and into the marsh. After a while, I slowed down. Pretty soon, I didn't want to cry so much.

It at least looked more like home here. I remembered the egg and I started to head over towards the wreck.

I was halfway there before I remembered my promise. I mean, I hadn't said "I promise" to Gray, but it was still a promise. That was the thing: Gray knew what he meant when he asked me, and I knew what he meant when I answered.

I stopped in the middle of some soft ground and sat on a rock. I didn't have any place to go. I felt kind of lost and miserable.

Pretty soon, Papa came and sat down beside me. I would have hugged

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

him but I was afraid he'd disappear. He wasn't as solid about being there as Mama.

"I think I'll run off," I said.

He sighed and leaned on his knees, pushed his glasses against his nose like he always did when he was thinking. He did the same thing that night Boss Skaldson said they were going to strike.

"You can't leave your family," he said.

"Family!" I picked up a stick and scratched the ground. "They don't want me. I never saw them before this summer."

"Still, they're your family now. Family's got to take you in when you got nowhere else to go." He coughed and turned away from me to spit something on the ground.

I looked at the ground. "I want you and Mama back." I stood up and walked away from him a little. "Why'd you have to go and get killed?"

"It had to be done, Ira. There were reasons—"

"*Family!* You and Mama ran off and left me with Gray. Family."

"Ira—"

"Gray's all the family I got."

I turned around and he was gone. There was nothing there but wind.

"I'm sorry," I said softly. "I didn't mean it."

I waited there for a long time, but he didn't come back.

Sam was painting the front deck when she drew the dory along the dock. "Hey," she called out to him.

"Yo!" Sam leaned over the railing. "You got a little trouble brewing."

She brought the dory close to him so he could speak softly. "With Gray?"

He shook his head. "Don't think so. Between Jack and Ira. Ira left this morning running like hell was after him—angry, you understand. Came back about an hour ago dragging his tail. Sad little kid. The big guy hasn't been around all day."

"Hm."

"I think," he looked up quickly at her and back at the water, a little embarrassed grimace on his face, "Jack doesn't take too kindly to Ira."

Sara pondered that. "I should get home," she said abruptly.

"Yeah, I've got to finish the forward deck before it gets too cold for the paint to dry." He left the railing and she could hear him whistling a quiet, mournful tune.

She tied up the dory and walked down the dock towards their slip. She was still a good distance away when she heard a slap and Ira crying. Jack was shouting something unintelligible. There was an eruption of water next to the boat and Gray was suddenly standing on the deck. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

moved inside faster than she'd ever seen him move. Sara started to run.

From the deck she heard Gray's voice: "Stop talking like that."

"How come, creep? Huh?" Jack shouted.

She stopped outside. There was a short pause.

"Because you are torturing someone you love," said Gray.

There was no sound for perhaps a minute, then Jack began sobbing and she ran inside.

"What's going on?" she cried. Jack ran to her and buried his face against her. "Did he hurt you? Jack! What's going on?"

Gray was motionless. Ira looked at Gray, then back at Sara.

Jack pulled back from her and she could see the mark of a slap on the side of his face. "Did Gray do this to you?" she said quietly.

Jack didn't answer.

"If you hurt my son," she said to Gray. Her voice was low and terrible. "If you ever touch my son . . . I'll hurt you."

"I did it," said Ira. His face was white but calm.

She looked at Jack. "Is that true?"

Jack nodded.

"Why?"

Ira put his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. "He called Gray a creep. It wasn't the first time."

She looked at Ira, then back to Jack, then back to Ira. Finally, she turned to Gray. "I still meant what I said."

"I know," said Gray.

Gray and I were gone the next day before sunup. I was ready to run off right then. I was ready to run off after dinner, but Gray said it wasn't right. I told him about what Papa had said and he said remember the three loves. Hell, I said, he'd been drilling me with that spatien stuff since I could talk. You shouldn't abandon your family, he said.

It was that kind of conversation.

Family.

On the way to the wreck, Gray didn't say anything. I didn't know what he was thinking, but I could tell he was thinking pretty hard about something. I guessed it was about Sara and Jack.

The egg was nearly twice as big as it had been the day before yesterday, and the smears were gone. Whatever it was, it had to have something better inside it than this. I began to think about what it could be. Gray was no help. He wouldn't even guess what it was. It always makes me mad, the way he won't guess anything. He only says things when he knows the answer to them, and what's the fun of that?

The egg was even more pretty now, with speckles of gold and silver,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the gray had begun to turn to a light blue. Whatever was inside of it had to be beautiful, too. I was still thinking of griffins and dragons, but if it wasn't either of them, it was probably something strange and unusual. I began to think about selling it. With the money, maybe we could buy a ticket out of here. Even Maxwell Station was better than this.

I helped Gray replace the rags over the egg, then the two of us sat on the edge of the wreck watching the ocean.

"I still want to run off," I said.

"You want your family back," he said.

It almost made me cry I felt so lonesome. He always did this to me, just when I thought I had things figured out, he'd say something true like that and it'd bust everything up.

"'Do you remember the three loves?" he said quietly.

I'd known that since I could talk. "Again? Love of family, love of work, love of duty."

"Just so," he murmured. "And always in that order."

I shrugged, having a feeling I wasn't going to like what followed. But he didn't say anything more, just looked out to sea for a long time.

"I have to go to the Miller's Hall on Friday. Do you want to come?" he said finally.

Go to Alien's Center? Was he serious? "Sure." I was hot to go.

Gray nodded. "Just so. We will leave close to dawn. Can you be up that early?"

You bet I could.

Sam was standing on top of the beam, a safety line leading from him to the crane cable above him. He was so little, Sara thought. But it seemed no hardship for him to use the fourteen pound sledgehammer. He lifted it high in the air and brought it down on the edge of the beam. The beam rang like a great steel bell and edged another quarter inch between the two framing girders.

He was much stronger than he looked.

He suddenly smiled at her and she started, realizing how closely she had been watching him.

"Hey, lady," he called down to her softly. Sam leaned back over the edge of the girder, looking from one end to the other. He pulled himself back on top and walked to the other end and again lifted the hammer. Bells rang among the towers.

She lit a cigarette, watching the gulls fly down below them.

"Okay, check your end."

Sara nodded and pulled herself up to the edge of the framing girder and measured the angle. "Okay here."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Weld that sucker."

She pulled down the mask and lit her torch. Three spot welds to hold the end, then up with the mask and she walked the beam to the other side. Three more spot welds.

"Come on down so I can get the rest," she grinned up at him, took a drag on the cigarette. He smiled and danced off the beam like a leprechaun.

Later, at noon, he brought his lunchbox over to her and they ate, watching the sunlight reflect between the buildings.

"You know what I like about Fridays," he said finally.

"No. What?"

He rubbed his hands together maniacally. "Payday. I can buy the *world*."

She laughed. "Hardly. Not on these wages."

Sam shrugged. "Well, it's my first payday." He looked away towards the harbor."Say, how about dinner?"

"Dinner?" It was as if a sudden wind blew through her. The air did not grow colder but it seemed closer to her skin. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know." He poured himself a cup of coffee from the thermos. "It's been a long summer. I've been out on the Bank, you've been here. I could use the company—do you know what it's like to talk about fishing for three months?"

She laughed and felt relieved and a little disappointed. "I have to go home tonight, though. The kids would worry if I didn't show up."

"Gray could take care of them."

"Gray." She started putting the remains of her lunch back into the lunchbox. "I don't want him around my kids when I can help it."

"Hey." He reached out and touched her arm.

Sara looked at him. He was smiling. "That was a joke," he said gently.

"Yeah." She smiled a little. "Not much of a joke."

"So I'm brain damaged. Three months with the fishing fleets'll do that to you."

"Well," she said slowly. "I still can't go out tonight. I got to get home."

He didn't say anything for a long minute and Sara suddenly wanted to stroke his cheek, feel the smooth skin laid over with a light bristle. A man's cheek. It had been a long time since she had touched a man's skin. Or a woman's skin. Just hugs and touching with Jack, or Ira. But not the touching between—

"You could come over to my boat for dinner tonight," he said. His eyes were bright and his munchkin face was crinkled with a silent laughter.

She couldn't help grinning. "Are you going to make me dinner?"

"You bet." He rubbed his hands together. "Got some bluefish I brought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back and some snapper. I know a guy on the pier I can trade with for a lobster. If you don't like that, I can get—"

Sara touched his arm and he stopped, looked at her hand, then at her.

"Is that a 'yes'?" he said.

"Christ. You—Christ." She threw up her hands. "Dinner. Now, let's work before Fitzpatrick fires us both."

Miller's Hall is named after this guy that first saw the aliens when they landed at Provincetown. Well, they didn't really land there. Some came out of the ship and asked directions to Boston. That's the way the story goes. Gray said it was a little different. He says they weren't really sure what was going on and whatever they asked those people might have sounded like asking for directions, but it wasn't that at all. Anyway, Miller is the guy's name.

We caught a ride with Kendall to Wellington Station and took the subway into town.

I'd never been downtown before. Miller's Hall sits across the street from the North End—where the Old North Church is. Gray told me about it and this guy named Paul Revere who carried these lights all across the towns, giving people fire. Up the other street from it is the old Customs House. Gray said it was also called the Gateway to the West. I'd never read anything like this, but maybe he'd read something I didn't.

The building itself was designed by the aliens so it doesn't look like people ought to live in it. Some do, though. I met a few. One side looks kind of melted, and the other shoots way up above the other buildings in this sharp pointed tower. It's a big place, most of a city block and maybe thirty or forty stories tall. There's a bigger diplomatic building out past Long Wharf in the harbor. It's huge, maybe two hundred stories or something. But, it's for big meetings and things. Miller's Hall is where the aliens rest.

While we were coming in on the subway, I tried to get Gray to tell me what we were doing here. He wouldn't tell me, just made that buzzing noise he makes when he doesn't want to answer a question.

"Well," I said, exasperated, "is it about the egg? At least tell me that."

He stopped and picked me up so I was looking at him straight in the eye. He didn't say anything for a minute and I began to get scared. Gray'd never acted that way before. He suddenly looked so *different* from me. I began to think maybe I should have stayed on the *Hercules*.

"Ira. Do you trust me?" he said in a very quiet voice.

"Sure." I shrugged.

"This is very important. Do not mention this thing at all today. Not on the street. Not in this building. Not on the train. Not on the boat

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

home. Nowhere. Not until I say you can. Do you understand me?" Papa was behind him nodding.

That made me mad, both of them ganging up on me like that. "Then why didn't you leave me home if things are so secret."

He didn't say anything for a minute. "We are finding out information. Some information may have something to do with the egg. Some may not. It is useless to speculate. But because we, together, are hatching the egg, this concerns you. You have a right to be here."

"Okay, okay." I punched him on the shoulder. "Okay, already. Don't go formal on me."

"You still don't understand." He paused. "It is important you don't speak here. I do not know how to threaten or persuade you. I can only ask. More: do not display any untoward knowledge. You know my language, you know Lingua—this I have taught you. Hide that."

He put me down and we went inside.

The lounge had ten or twenty aliens of weird types. None of them paid much attention to us—I guess we weren't any weirder to them than they were to us. But the place looked strange to me. I mean it was all windows on all four sides, big windows, looking out over the harbor from maybe ten or twenty meters up. I looked back out the door we came in and it was glass and showed the street.

"What are these window things. Holograms?" I asked.

Gray shook his head. "No. They are windows." He looked at them a moment, then turned his head back to me. "N-space was used in the construction of Miller's Hall."

A little alien, shorter than me, came stalking over to me. He stood up at me, all shrunk up and deformed looking, wrinkled brown skin and these *big* blue eyes, swearing a blue streak. Finally, he calmed down enough to stare at me. "What are you staring at?" he said finally.

I started to get mad again, but I remembered what I promised Gray.

"Nothing," I said.

He humphed and hawed a minute. "Nothing. Nothing, he says. Nothing." He put his face almost nose to nose with me and all I could see was those blue eyes.

"Nothing. Tell me, runt, do *you* believe in fairies."

"No," I muttered.

"Hah!" he yelled and jumped back, laughing and clapping his hands. "A smart one! Hah!" He walked off clapping his hands.

I looked up at Gray and he looked down at me.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Don't worry. He likes you," Gray said.

"How can you tell?" I reached over and grabbed one of his lower legs and held it. I felt nervous all of a sudden.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He didn't eat you, did he?"

I looked up at him and he just stared back. I punched him hard on the leg. That was Gray's idea of a joke. Like his name. All spatiens are Gray. No spatien had a human name until Gray. Naming himself something special with a name that all spatiens could use was Gray's idea of a joke. Like this.

It made me mad that he'd make a joke now, when ten minutes before he was warning me to keep quiet. Then, I figured out that Gray was trying to make me feel better, from what he had talked with me about outside. Maybe he'd even set it up. I punched him again on the leg.

We took a long elevator up into the pointed part of the Hall. Up here you could see all the islands, the different buildings out in the harbor, all the hovercraft. I looked down into the city and saw all the Back Bay canals, all with these little boats and canoes going down like people walking down streets. Gray was watching me.

"A hundred years ago, they were streets, not canals."

"Jeez." I shook my head. "What happened?"

"Boston sank. It's still sinking. Before that it was water again. They dumped landfill into the river and made Back Bay. When the Mayflower first came here, Boston was nearly an island." He pointed to the water in Back Bay, and the walls around the inner city ring. "The walls follow the contours of the original Boston." He paused. "The borders are being recycled."

He stared at me and I wrinkled my nose at him. "Ha. Ha. Some joke."

Gray shrugged and led me away from the windows through a long corridor. Again, there were windows on both sides. One side showed the harbor, the other showed the city. It was a different angle now, looking down on the streets with the big buildings, the old Customs House, things like that.

In the next room, there were just two opposite walls made of windows, both looking out on the same section of the harbor. This made me dizzy. I could see the same gulls flying on opposite sides of the room.

"Are *these* holograms?" I asked, not looking at either of them.

"No. Just windows."

The room had high ceilings like an auditorium. On the floor there was a thick carpet and big pillows where there were various kinds of aliens—too many to keep track of. It was like in one of those bird zoos—aviaries, that's the word—where there are forty or fifty kinds of birds and they move around and are these specks of color, some of them standing still and looking around, some of them hiding, a whole bunch of them shooting over you like bullets. But they aren't all that separate. They're all blurred together. The only way you can tell them apart is by staring hard at the ones that stand still, reading the little descriptions,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and wait for the ones that are going like fire over you, hoping like hell you've remembered the names right. You just forget the ones that are hiding.

Well, I didn't have any descriptions.

I saw the little guy that had bugged me in the lounge walking around the sides, kind of watching me from the edge of the crowd.

We walked up to this one lounge and sat down. No one paid us much attention and we sat there for maybe ten minutes. I was getting fidgety.

"What do we do now?"

"We wait here."

"For what?" Maybe Gray had something planned.

"I am not sure."

That was all I could get out of him. He wouldn't even guess—spatiens are like that. They never talk about anything unless it's right there. A pain.

A couple of minutes later Gray began to rub my shoulders the way he does and I got relaxed and a little sleepy, so I leaned against him and he was real warm. I fell asleep like somebody clubbed me.

I dreamed about Papa. He was trying to tell me something but I couldn't hear him. It was like he was a long way away. He was all agitated and excited and nervous. He kept calling to me, and even though he was only across the room I couldn't hear him. I woke up and there was a kind of buzzing in the room. I sat up and looked around and saw a lot of the aliens looking towards the other door—the other door from where Gray and I had come in, that is. Through the other door was this centaur—that's what they're called. Not like the Greek myths, you understand. This wasn't half a man, half a horse. This was more like the body of a sow bug and the forward body of a praying mantis—like he was made of sharp points. All but his eyes. His eyes were big, with slit pupils like a cat's.

He came in the room, moving jerky—at first I thought there was something wrong with him. Then, I saw it was like he was in freeze frame motion. He didn't move smoothly, but in little jumps like a snapshot. I looked closer and saw I could just barely see him move between those freeze frames. He'd stop, look down at somebody—he must have been nearly three meters tall—somebody on his other side would speak to him and suddenly, he'd be turned to them. He was so fast it almost made me sick to watch him.

He sidled along the wall, talking to people. The whole room was watching him. It came to me, then, that he was moving towards us, stalking us, almost. With those wicked looking hands. It made me shake. I looked up at Gray. He was watching the centaur. I'd never seen him watch anything so close, even me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Finally, the centaur came near us, looked up and saw us both, but only acted like he'd seen Gray. He straightened up and came over to us. "Old-one-of-many-names," he said in Lingua. "I did not know you were here."

Gray made kind of a half squat bow, never taking his eyes off the centaur. "Holy one, I, myself, can barely believe my good fortune."

The centaur leaned back against his lower half like an old man sitting down in an armchair. "It has been a long time since I have seen you. I have not seen a member of your family since we destroyed that nest—half a cycle ago? Perhaps a full cycle? Are you the last?"

Again, Gray made the half bow. "I do not think I am the last, Holy One. I estivated for almost two cycles before I was found. This was due to the destruction of my nest."

"Ah." The centaur raised his hand and let it fall like a shrug. "Of course. Is this your pet?" he said, looking at me for the first time.

I was almost crazy with nervousness, trying not to look like I knew anything, crazy to find out this thing had killed Gray's family. I wished I had a rifle, a laser, something. It wouldn't have done any good. You could see up close that he spent most of his time waiting for us to catch up. His attention was wandering all around the room. Sharp, though. Damned sharp. I just did my best to look stupid.

"It is no pet, holy one. It is my nephew."

"Are you certain?" The centaur put one arm on the other like a man folding his arms, but this looked like he was getting ready for something.

"I am certain, holy one. How are your offspring?"

The centaur looked up at him. "Fine. I brought two pupa with me and they will be molting soon. No eggs as yet. Pity, as I have been hungering for a delicacy a great deal. But it would be a shame to return home with no children so I have restrained myself. Soon, though, they will molt and of course become children. Tell me: do you think I would be too shamed by returning with only one child?"

"You have no eggs, holy one?"

"None as yet. I have tried several times but the flesh will not obey me." The centaur turned his head all the way around behind him, watching something for a quick moment and then brought it back again with a snap. I wanted to throw up. "Give me the pupa you have. It would be well cooked. Look," he pointed to me. "It does not even know language."

"I cannot, holy one."

"Come. Give it to me as a present." He stiffened somehow and looked just like a whip in mid-air.

I heard a soft sound from Gray and turned towards him. He'd extended every finger on every arm and each one grew a razor.

"I cannot, holy one," he said softly. "Forgive me."

They stared at each other for some minutes, then the centaur relaxed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It is a very great sin. But, perhaps the fault is mine. I encourage my appetites as much as I can. Perhaps that is not always a virtue." His head snapped around and back again. "I must go, my friend. Until we meet again."

He turned and moved away as smoothly as if he'd been on wheels.

"What's going on?" I whispered to Gray.

"Hush." He retracted all of his fingers and sat back down.

"I want to go home. Let me out of this place."

He reached for me and held me close to him. "Be patient a while longer. We cannot leave just yet. It wouldn't be polite."

We sat there for maybe half an hour more, then Gray stood up. "We can go now."

Outside a fog had come into the city. I pulled my jacket in close. "Jesus. What was that all about?"

He didn't say anything immediately, just looked around the street and acted like he was listening for something. "It went better than I expected. I think we can talk now. It was about the egg."

"Christ!" Gray can really be a pain in the ass sometimes. "I know that. Who was the centaur? Why did we need to come here? Did he really destroy your nest—home, or whatever? Talk to me!"

Gray seemed to mull over that for a minute or two. "The centaur is—bishop is the best word, I think. I have met him slightly several times. His family and my family disputed over some territory in the Maxwell Station system. My family was destroyed, or if not completely destroyed forced to evacuate the system. I do not know where they are. Your people found me in the asteroid belt about a thousand years later. Before you were born. I thought the egg might be a centaur egg, but I could not find out directly—centaurs do not allow information about them to be published. They will talk about almost anything, but refuse to allow it to be written down. All I was able to find out was that there was only one centaur family on earth, and that it was the bishop's."

I shuddered. "Would he really have eaten me?"

Gray nodded. "They consider pre-sentients a delicacy."

"Pre-sentients?"

"A centaur has odd and rigid rules over what is a person and what is not: communication defines a person in most circumstances."

"Jesus! I could have talked to him!"

"I know that."

I hit him on the leg. "Why did you tell me to keep it a secret? I could have been killed. It just seems stupid."

We kept walking. "If you had spoken, he might have challenged you to an eating duel."

"I can eat with the best of them."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"An eating duel," said Gray carefully, "is a duel in which the loser gets eaten. To the centaurs, losers are not persons by definition."

"Oh," I said, feeling very small. "Why was I here at all, then?" I felt so lost and confused.

"I did not want the bishop to think I had come for revenge. If I brought my family, he would know for certain I had not come for war. I don't want to die either, Ira."

We walked a little further and I reached up and took his hand. "I'm sorry about your family, Gray."

Gray didn't say anything for a block or so. "They are gone."

As evening had fallen, a fog had come into town from the nooks and canals of Back Bay, rolled into the city like a stumbling drunk. As the elevator descended towards it, Sara had the feeling of diving into water or cotton or something else she could drown in. She was to meet Sam on his boat about eight. But right now, she needed a drink. She left the building almost as soon as she hit the ground floor.

Now, she was below the bright sunlight she had left on the ninetieth floor. The fog had given the city a dreamy, half-real quality. The locust trees in front of the old Customs House burned yellow through it, the fall colors pastel and washed out. The upper city was completely lost. Here, there was only this corner, filled with tourist shops, street vendors and a man selling flowers, each close and intimate in the fog.

She bought a pretzel from a cart and waited while the vendor warmed it in one of those battery powered alien ovens. One of those would be good on the *Hercules*, she thought.

Sitting beneath the locust trees and eating slowly, guiltily—Sam would be cooking dinner for her in a couple of hours—she was suddenly struck with the memory of Hull, burning. For a long moment, she could smell the explosions like fireworks mixed with the smell of burning houses and the sea. She remembered hitting a nameless man across the face with a crowbar—dark asian hair, stubble, wild eyes, blood spilling from his forehead as he fell into the water—when he had tried to take the dory away from her. She had tried to get to the house—the only house they had ever had after all that time living on boats, that her father and mother wouldn't leave and would not believe they had to leave until it was too late—when she found Roni, burned, arm broken, half swimming through the hip-deep water. Sara dragged Roni into the dory. She started up the motor again to get to the house when the MDC planes came in low and dropped something—she never knew what—that exploded into a sheet of flame. The firestorm raced towards them in a boiling, guttering wave. She turned the dory and gunned the motors. The flames leaped from house to house, low-pitched explosions following her. Don't foul the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prop! Don't foul the prop! The dory burst out into the harbor. Up on Telegraph Hill, the gangs were shooting back. Hog Island was firing anti-aircraft guns at the MDC planes. Two planes banked towards it, fired two missiles—Sara grabbed Roni and dove into the bottom of the boat. There was a blinding flash and the sea roared around them. A hot wind sucked the breath from her lungs. There was a sound too loud to be understood. Then, it passed and utter silence came to her. Am I deaf?

She looked back and Hog Island was flattened. The fires had been blown by the wind into smoke.

Sara sat unseeing on the park bench, holding herself. She could never even identify where her house had been, much less her parents. It had taken hours just to find the *Hercules*. At least, that was intact. There were no looters. Maybe they were dead. Maybe they had been blinded by the flash. Maybe Sara was so deep in shock she couldn't see them. She left Hull, the smoke masking the sun into a deep red disk hanging sickly in the west, a cold south wind blowing them towards Boston. Roni never took her eyes off Sara that whole night. She watched every move Sara made.

Sara looked up at the locust tree and shook herself. Almost seven. Time to go. She stood up slowly, shaking off the memory. Someday, someday, she would bury that memory. Roni getting herself killed only made it worse. "Damn you, Roni," she said under her breath. "I didn't drag you out of there just to die like a dog."

It was that same south wind that blew across her on the way home. She lit a cigarette and rummaged in the dory's small hold. There was a half-empty fifth of rye whisky buried under a tow line. Do we want to begin here? Yes, I think we do. It is always better to begin early. You're in too lousy a mood for dinner with Jesus Christ himself, much less Sam. That's it. Take a good one. Feel that deep, aching warmth burn in your belly.

Jack was waiting for her on the *Hercules*.

"Hey, honey," she said as she tied up. "I'm home."

Jack nodded shortly. He leaned against the hull and stared moodily out the window.

Damn. He's acting like a teenager again. "Something wrong?"

"No."

"Sam asked me over to his boat for dinner." No response. "Your Mama's got a date."

Jack didn't look at her. "That's good," he said distractedly.

Damn. He's getting more like his father every day. Don't think about Mike. Don't. He was slime. He was scum. And didn't I want him back for the longest time?

She sat next to him and watched him in the darkening light. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whisky and the sunset light met and mellowed in her. Ah, Sara. Don't you miss him, though.

"Hey, honey," she said softly.

Jack looked at her and she started to reach out and hold him but she could feel him stiffen. "What's the matter, Jack?"

Jack shrugged again. "I don't know. I'm still thinking about it." He looked up at her searchingly, then seemed to find something that reassured him. He grinned. "I'll be okay. You go have a good time with Sam. Gonna find me a pop?"

It was an old joke, but thin now. She slapped his knee lightly. "Watch your mouth. Christ. I've got to take a shower."

She left Jack on the Hercules some time later, walked nervously over to Sam's *Casey*. She was wearing a dress—she hadn't worn a dress in years. She was even wearing earrings.

Sam was wearing a jacket—from the way he wore it, he hadn't worn a jacket in years, either. That made her feel better.

He didn't say anything as he gestured her inside, then leaned down and whispered conspiratorially: "I've got steak."

"Go on," she laughed.

"No. Honest." He pointed to the galley. "It's in there. You can see it for yourself."

"That's a day's salary."

"Steak," he said. "Meat. Beef. Carne. Le boef. Thick, juicy, broiled, bloody—"

She laughed and touched his mouth to make him stop and he did and her fingertips tingled. Sara pulled them back and folded her arms, embarrassed.

"Anyway," he said suddenly after a silence, "I've got it. And we're gonna eat it. You may as well adjust."

"I'm adjusted. Let's eat it now."

He shook his head and held up his hands palm towards her. "Not so fast. We have to make preparations. We can't insult the cattle gods."

She sat down and began to laugh. It was uncontrollable and she sobbed and held her stomach.

"It wasn't that funny," he said with a shy grin.

"Damn you," she giggled. "You did this to me in high school, too. I'd forgotten."

"My dear, my dignity is ruined."

"Christ, it's good to see you again."

He didn't reply. "Dinner is served."

Steak was rare—usually meat came like a slab, grown in the huge meat farms in the midwest. Steak came from an animal. A cow? No. Steer. It came from a steer. Steak was expensive.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sam had broiled it perfectly.

"Do you like it?"

She made an inchoherent noise around a piece of gristle and nodded.

Half an hour later, she leaned back and patted her full stomach. "I am satisfied. Life is good."

Sam leaned towards her. "There's more."

She shrugged. "It could only be a letdown."

He reached above them and out of a cabinet pulled down a bottle. "I don't think so." He handed her the bottle.

Her eyes grew round. "Glenfiddich! Christ on a stick! How long have you had this?"

Sam grinned at her and leaned on the table. "My daddy gave it to me. He brought it back from Scotland a few years ago."

"Christ," she said again."This is too much. Put it back, Sam."

"Too late." He brought down two glasses. "You don't want me to drink alone."

The scotch made her feel warm and sleepy, like the world had no more sharp edges. Sam turned on the radio and they listened to some fluffy pop station. She didn't like it. "Turn it to something else." She took the bottle and held it lovingly in her arms. "Got a cigarette?" she said.

"Don't smoke."

"He doesn't smoke," she said to the bottle. "He's a wonder, Sam is."

Sam found a jazz station faint but clear. "That's better." He hummed along with a clarinet.

"Yeah," she said and half-filled both their glasses.

"Want to dance?" he said with a faint giggle.

"Sure."

They stood up and swayed together and he felt so right, in her arms, close, moving slowly together to the faint jazz. It had been so long she wanted to cry. Just to be touched. Just to be warm with someone else.

Outside, she heard a cry.

"Jack?" she said and the scotch blew through her mind.

There was somebody shouting and somebody answering.

"Jack!" She was outside. Sam followed her but she didn't notice. Gray was standing outside the cabin holding Jack up in the air, struggling. The cabin inside was a mess, the cushions were slashed. The table was overturned.

"Let him go!" She shrieked, grabbed a crowbar. *"Let him go!"*

Ira launched himself at her and grabbed her arms. The gouge on the bar looped in the air towards his face. Gray's fingers closed on it and held it as if it were stuck in concrete.

There was a long moment where Gray held Jack in one set of arms,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the crowbar in another and grasped the railing with a third. "Jack is all right," he said and pulled the crowbar from her.

"Jesus," she heard Sam say behind her.

Jack stood absolutely still.

"What is going on?" she asked him. "What is going on?"

Jack looked at her, then at Ira, Gray, back at her. Back to Gray.

"What happened?" she asked Gray.

Gray did not speak for a long minute watching Jack. "I do not know. I do not know what is happening at all."

"And what the hell happened to the goddamn cabin?" Sara demanded.

"I did it," said Gray slowly. "It was an accident. I did not mean to. I misjudged things. I will fix it. I will fix it sometime tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Ira burst out. "We were going. . . ." and his voice trailed off. He looked at Sara and then looked down.

"Go where?" she said, suspicious. Where would Ira be going that he would hide it? "The ferry. You two were going to the *Hesperus* tomorrow?"

Gray nodded. "We were."

She looked at him coldly. "I told you not to take him there."

He did not speak.

"Don't do it again. I won't have you around if you do that. I won't have you anywhere near me." She stood up next to him and stared up into his face. She could feel the nearness of his rhino body, hear the rasp of leather as he breathed. "You hear me? You understand this time?"

He seemed to shrink on himself a little. "I understand."

"Sara," softly from behind her. "It's not that big a thing."

Sara whirled on Sam. "Get off my boat, Sam. Don't tell me how to raise my family. Get out of here."

Sam shook his head as if he'd been slapped. He stiffly turned and walked back towards his own boat.

"Okay," she said. "Okay now." She turned to Jack and Ira. "Get inside and into bed. That's enough. There ain't going to be any more fireworks tonight."

I was laying in the bunk an arm's length from Jack. I could hear him breathing, snuffling sometimes and muttering. Damn. I don't know what he was doing when we came back, but it was him, not Gray, that had ripped up the cabin. Him. And Gray'd lied for him. Gray would never lie for me.

Gray'd never lied before.

Before, that I knew about, I said to myself. How'd I know what was lie and what was truth?

All my life, I'd been with Gray and now it was like something had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been pulled out from under me. He wasn't mine any more. I leaned over on my side and shook my head.

"Ira?" said Jack softly.

"What do you want?"

He didn't say anything for a minute. "I'm sorry I called Gray names."

Sorry. Yeah, right. Gray liked the son-of-a-bitch. Gray *protected* him. Christ.

"Ira?"

"I heard you."

There was a rustle in the cabin and I knew he was turned towards me. "I've been pretty mean to you."

I didn't say anything.

He leaned back and made some kind of a sound, like crying maybe. Like coughing. "I'm sorry."

Like that made it better or something.

"You know."

I just wished he'd shut up. I didn't want to hear him.

"You know," he said again. "I never knew my dad. He split before I was born. And with Mama the way she is, we never really had a family. Now, with you and Gray—it's as if I had a real family."

I sat up and looked at him. "I ain't your brother. Gray can be if he wants to. I don't want any part of you." I stood up. He didn't move, just watched me. "I don't want any part of your friggin' mother. Or you. Or Gray. I just want to get shut of the whole friggin' lot of you." I finished getting dressed. "If the whole mess of you died, I'd piss on your grave."

I left, quiet like, so nobody'd be awake. I looked outside, but Gray was gone. Good riddance. I was on my own now. It was just me.

I walked through the marshes towards the egg. Day was just coming around. The light was kind of a pale violet. I stopped in the marsh and watched it. My Mama stood with it and watched it with me.

"You're misjudging Gray," she said.

I looked at her. "I don't want you telling me what to judge and not. You're dead." I turned back towards the wreck and didn't wait to see if she disappeared or not.

The ferry was the same. Sunlight was just pouring over the hull when I got there, golden and rosy. The egg was where we'd left it—where I'd left it. It was bigger yet. The skin seemed swelled almost to bursting.

"You and me," I said to it. And it seemed like it could hear me. "You and me. We'll take a ride around the world. I don't care if you're a griffin or a dragon or anything." Tears started to leak out of my eyes. I shook them away. "I don't care. You and me. We'll get out of this goddamn place."

The egg didn't say anything and the tears started up again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Sara got up too and sat in the head for a while. It had been a while since she had drunk that much. Her head felt hot and she rested it against the hatch to cool it. After a little while, she felt better. She went out into the main cabin, but didn't want to go back to bed. The cold and lonely bed frightened her for some reason.

Mike. I still want you to come back.

The thought came to her out of the clear darkness in the back of her mind. Fourteen years and she hadn't left it behind.

She sat in one of the chairs in the galley and lit a cigarette. And Sam—did he know what he was getting into? What a snakepit. She wished she hadn't snapped at him. He was only trying to be a good guy.

Yeah. Right. She inhaled the cigarette savagely. Good guys. They're all good guys. Sam was no different.

"Mama?" came from behind her.

She turned. It was Jack, half dressed and looking at her vaguely. Had Mike looked that young when they were in school? "Yeah, honey?"

"It wasn't Gray who ripped up the cushions."

He stood next to her and watched, his eyes dry and calm. As if he'd already cried until he had cried himself out but still had one thing left to do.

"Who did it, honey?"

"I did. Gray and Ira came back and I went crazy, ripping the place apart. I just went crazy."

She pulled him to her and held him. He submitted to it, leaning against her. So this is what it's come to, Roni. I got to get rid of them. Gray for sure. Maybe Ira, too. Because, Roni, in the end, at the final curtain, nothing means as much to me as my little boy. Not you. Not Ira—certainly not Gray. Not Sam. Not even Mike, gone for so long. In the end, it's me and him.

"It's all right, honey." She held him tight. I'm sorry, Roni. That's the way it is. "It's all right."

After a while, he pulled away and looked at her sideways, then turned and shuffled back to bed. He closed the door after him.

She stayed up and smoked another cigarette, thinking how to tell Gray. He was first. He would have to leave tomorrow. Then. Then, we would see about Ira.

She must have sat there for at least an hour, thinking, dreaming. The sky began to lighten and the sun rose.

There was an eruption of water outside and the entire boat shook as Gray landed on the deck. Dripping, he stalked into the cabin, ran past Sara and ripped the door open.

"Jack! Where is Ira?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sara stood and saw past Gray Ira's empty bed. "Oh, my God."

Jack looked up at Gray. "I don't know. He left a couple of hours ago."

Sara cried out. "Why didn't you tell me, Jack?"

Jack looked at her out of Mike's blue eyes—different now, colder, stronger. "He wanted to go and he didn't want me along. I wanted to protect him. Like Gray protected me."

"Loyal child," said Gray. "But foolish. No. I am the fool." He turned and began to leave the cabin.

"Gray, wait!"

"No time! The boy is in danger. I did not follow him, thinking he was too upset. It was time for him to be by himself. But he disappeared like a ghost to me. He is gone."

"Where are you going?" she wailed after him.

"The wreck. The egg is hatching—I fear it."

"Wait—damn you, wait! We can take the dory. It's got a good motor. It'll get us there quicker than you can go."

He stopped for a moment, absolutely still. Looked down at her. "You are right. I will take it."

"You will not, you son-of-a-bitch! It's mine, like Jack's my kid and Ira's my nephew."

Gray shook his head. "You are right. I will follow."

They climbed into the dory and thank God it started the first time for once. Gray sat in the middle and they left the dock and shot out across harbor at full speed.

"What is this egg, anyway?" she yelled above the wind.

"I don't know. We found it in the wreck and it pleased the boy to hatch it. I thought it no danger—at first I thought it might be a centaur egg."

Sara felt befuddled. Centaurs? "A centaur?"

"A species that would consider Ira a delicacy." He held his hands together and even in that position Sara could sense the anguish in him. "But I asked the centaur bishop and the bishop said there were no eggs here. So I felt safe. No other egg species here is dangerous."

"So there's no danger."

"There is always danger, but I thought I could head it off and still let the boy play for a while. But now the thing hatches and Ira is away from me. I do not know what the thing is." He fell silent. "His mother and father might protect him."

"What?"

He turned to her. "He sees his mother and father at times. They speak to him. They may lead him away."

"Are you crazy?"

"No."

"Ira sees ghosts? Christ. The poor kid. Making this up."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The wind cut through them and the spray splattered across them as Sara turned the boat inland. They could already see the *Hesperus* outlined dark against the beach and the rising sun.

"I am not sure he is making them up."

"You've been encouraging this? I don't believe it. They aren't real." She wished she had a cigarette. That's it. Gray had to go.

Gray looked at her out of those huge eyes.

"How do you know they aren't?"

For her life, she could not answer.

The egg was moving a little now. Kind of wobbling side to side.

I looked and found this old metal bar to help break the egg, help the dragon get loose. I stood next to it—it was smelling pretty ripe now—and didn't do anything. I couldn't decide. Even dragons might be fragile when they were still in the egg. I could hurt it. I chewed on my lip and put down the bar, sat back and watched it.

"Ira? Ira!" called my father from the edge of the boat. I wasn't going to go see them. They were just ghosts. They called again. Oh, well. The egg was going to be a little longer, I figured. I went to the edge and looked down. Both of them were there.

"Come down here," called Papa. Mama nodded. "Come down," she said.

I sat on the edge of the hull and shook my head. "I don't want to listen to you any more. You're dead. Gray's gone weird on me. I don't like Aunt Sara and Jack. Leave me alone. I got the egg."

They looked at one another.

"Son?" said my father softly. "Gray and Sara are coming to get you. They'll take you back. You know they will."

I could hear a motor on the other side of the wreck. "Are you trying to fool me?"

Papa shook his head. "Absolutely not. They're almost here."

"What about the egg?"

"The egg can take care of itself. Come on!" yelled my mother.

I jumped the three meters down to the beach and tumbled. It hurt my feet.

Mama and Papa led me into the marsh. Deep into the swamp, hurrying me, urging me to go so fast I couldn't see where I was going. I could barely breathe for running. The tall grass whipped my face and the mud was knee deep. Where the hell was I? Finally, they stopped.

I sat down in the water. I couldn't breathe. It was like nothing in the world was so important as breathing.

"He's safe now," said my Mama.

"What?" I said and looked up. They were gone. They were gone and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I didn't know where the hell I was. They'd tricked me. "God damn you!" I yelled after them. "God damn you to hell!"

Gray moved to the front of the boat, looking for all the world like a hound ready to leap in the water after fallen birds.

"Back a little, for Christ's sake," yelled Sara. "Don't swamp the boat."

"I can't find him."

"Of course you can't find him. We're not there yet."

"You don't understand. Since he was born, I have always known where he is. Now he is gone." Gray turned towards Sara. "He is no longer a child. Perhaps that is why I cannot find him."

Sara shrugged. When this was over, Gray had to leave before he made her crazy. "That egg's in the wreck, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, that's where he'll be."

They beached the dory and moved around the side of the wrecked ferry.

"Where is the egg?"

"In the center of the wreck."

Sara looked at the rusty hull. "We're going to have to climb that?"

Gray shook his head. "There is no time," he said. He picked her up and held her in two sets of arms, then leaped to the top of the hull. He released her and moved purposefully inward. She followed.

In the center of the wreck, the sunlight had already made the area warm. The egg was moving.

"Ira?" called Gray. Sara called also.

"That thing's going to hatch soon." The thing was huge now, almost a meter broad and the surface was a writhing pink and green.

"He is not here." Gray turned towards her. "We had best back away from it."

The egg exploded. A shard caught Sara's shoulder and knocked her down. Something brightly colored that seemed to be made chiefly of mouth and teeth and tail shot into the air and hovered over them. It moved jerkily—its huge, outsized mouth opening and closing mechanically. It quivered. Shook itself in the air. Pawed at its teeth, pulling shards of broken eggshell out from between its fangs. Sara watched it, frozen. Unable to move so much as her eyeballs from the thing. It was a dragon. Its feathers were bright orange. Its wings beat too fast to be seen—but she could feel the air from them. It looked around, cocked its head this way and that as if testing the air. Then, it saw her.

It seemed to smile. And Sara wanted to scream but she had no time. As suddenly as it saw her it dove—faster than anything she had ever seen, faster than anything had a right to be. Something huge and massive and equally as fast shot over her and intercepted the dragon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The dragon screamed and its talons and teeth were a blur. Gray made a noise like a cry and tried to knock it away and it rolled away in the air, tumbling and screaming. It caught itself and shot above them, saw Gray and dove for him. Gray was more ready this time and there was a brief blur of movement, each slashing, the dragon biting, that seemed to take forever. Then, the dragon tumbled across the deck and slammed the hull so hard it rang. It shook its head and moaned. Gray leaped over to it, all over knives now. Each arm sprouted a dozen. He slashed it and the dragon screamed and tore off one of his arms. He picked it up with another arm and slammed it against the hull. The dragon tried to reach the hand holding it, but couldn't. Gray slammed it against the hull again. He slammed it again. It sounded like a pile driver. The dragon clawed at him but had no strength. He slammed it again and again until it no longer moved and then he continued, methodically and mechanically.

Sara approached him. The dragon was a bloody mess. "Gray?"

Gray did not answer but slammed the dragon into the wall.

"Gray? I think it's dead."

Gray looked at her, then at the dragon. "Oh." Then he looked at himself. "Oh." He sat back and stared at the stump of his arm. "I am hurt." There were slashes through the armor in his chest and arms. The hand at the end of one of his other arms was nearly chewed off. All of the wounds oozed something like tar.

"What can I *do,* Gray?"

"Do? Oh. Yes." He looked over to where the egg had been. "One of those old mattresses. And the tarp."

She dragged the mattress to him and he tore out the padding and stuffed it in the slashes and the stump of his arm. The oozing stopped.

He looked at her. "I will live. I have repair cement at home to cover this, then I will be better."

Sara sat back and shook her head, laughed tensely, softly.... Of course. "Repair cement."

He looked at her. "Spatiens do not heal. They must be repaired."

"You sound like you think you're a robot."

"No." He appeared thoughtful. "Not exactly. Spatiens were built thousands of years ago. Those that did this are dead or gone now. We are all that's left." He looked at her. "Think of me as an archeological find that has been somewhat damaged."

She laughed again. He moved and she saw the dragon, all needles and teeth. "What was it?"

"An object of my stupidity." He balled one fist and for a moment, Sara thought he was going to hit it again. Instead, he pushed the bedding tighter into his wounds. "Stupid. I thought only the centaurs would be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

creatures such as this. All things like to share their heritage. This is one of the centaurs' pets."

"A pet. Dear God. A pet." She pulled her knees up to her chin and felt very cold.

Gray looked up. "That tarp. Get me that tarp. He's coming back."

She brought the tarp to him and he wrapped his body into a sort of toga. "What are you doing?"

"It is shameful to show wounds that have not been cared for. At least, it is shameful to show them to your children."

She looked at him. "Children?"

"You did not know? You are all, all of you, my family. Why else would I follow him here? Why would I try so hard to understand you? Why would I spend my life for you? To me, what else could you be?"

I ran back toward the wreck until I couldn't breathe. My side felt like somebody'd taken and shoved a hot poker in it. My face felt hot like I was going to cry. Tricked. By my own folks. By my own parents. I sat down next to a clump of Indian rice and cried and rested until I could breathe again. Christ. *Christ!*

After a minute or two, I could move and walked back to the ferry. It was quiet. I climbed up on the hull and sneaked around to the center to see if the egg was all right.

It was like one of those pictures you see in magazines, distant, not meaning anything until you see one little feature that hits you like a fist.

They were sitting next to the hull, just watching me. The egg was all broken up. Gray was all tangled up in a tarp. The dragon—and it had been a dragon, after all—was all crumpled up next to the wall.

I stepped towards them. They were just watching me. Gray wrapped up like that reminded me of when they brought Papa home, all bandaged up and covered with blood, the miners singing that mournful song. I'd never heard anybody but papa sing that song before, and I couldn't forget it now. It just ran over and over in my head:

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night,
alive as you and me,
I said Joe Hill you're ten years dead,
I never died, said he.

And they couldn't find Mama, just pieces of her 'cause the supervisors had thrown a grenade and she'd caught it and it had blown up before she could throw it away. Papa's face was so still. And I knew he was dead, gone, and everything I ever wanted from him seemed small, and I seemed small. Damn you, I wanted to say then. Damn you for leaving me. I never wanted that. Fuck the miners. Fuck the supervisors.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And the dragon was dead. My ticket away. And Gray was standing there, shrouded like he was dead. "Fuck you! Goddamn you, Gray! Goddamn you Sara! Fuck you! Fuck this boat! Fuck the dragon! *Fuck all of you!*"

I just stood there, swearing, and I wanted to pick up things and throw them at them the way I wanted to hurt the miners that brought Papa home, the way I wanted to hurt him for leaving me.

I felt strangled, dying. I stared at them, quiet now. They didn't say anything. I left the ferry and went back into the marsh and collapsed. I beat the ground with my fists and my feet. It wasn't fair. Everybody left me. Everybody ran away and I was just left there, alone.

"Jesus," Sara said at last, and started to follow Ira.

"Wait." Gray touched her gently and his voice sounded more weary and defeated than any voice she had ever heard. "He needs—to be alone, perhaps." Gray pushed himself to his feet and the tarp partially unraveled. The rents in his skin made her feel queasy. He swayed on his feet. "I am no fit member of your family. All things I have tried to do I have failed. I—"

"Hush," she said and tried to steady him. "Let's go home. Ira will come home eventually."

"I do not know what to do," Gray breathed softly. She could smell him this close, and he smelled rich and strong, like sweat or bread. She helped him to the ocean side of the ferry, and he climbed down as slowly and as carefully as an old man.

He did not move in the boat until she got him home. He stumbled as he walked next to her onto the dock and into the boat. Jack was there and helped her put him in her bed.

"Where's the repair cement?" she asked.

Gray looked at her as if from a great distance. "In the equipment locker. Next to the diesel starter fluid."

Sara found a can with various symbols she could not read hidden behind a can of oil. It belonged in the medicine cabinet, she decided. Enough of this separateness.

Jack didn't say a word and the two of them cleaned the tattered tarp and bedclothes out of the wounds and filled them with cement using a putty knife. Gray gave them soft instructions but after a time, his voice fell silent and Sara thought him asleep. She motioned Jack out of the cabin and began to leave herself.

"Thank you," said Gray suddenly.

She turned to him and realized he no longer looked alien to her. Different, yes. But he looked the way she would have expected him to look. Scarred. Tired. He belonged there.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's a small thing to do for someone who saved my life." She shrugged and looked out the porthole to the bow. He'd been sleeping there all summer. "We need to build you a real room. There's not enough room for you."

"I do not need much."

She smiled at him. "None of us do. But nobody in my family sleeps in the open like an animal."

Sara thought she heard a second "thank you" behind her, but she wasn't sure. It wouldn't have mattered if she had.

Jack was looking at her anxiously. "Is he going to be all right?"

"I don't know." Sara looked back toward the cabin. "I hope so."

Jack looked at her, then down at the ground, then back at her. "Are you going to send him away?"

Sara sat at the table in the galley. She lit a cigarette and wished she had a drink. "Do you want me to?"

Jack shook his head.

She exhaled smoke. "Okay. How come?"

" 'Cause," he stopped, embarrassed. "He deserves to be here."

"I agree. I'm not going to send him away."

Jack looked relieved. "I was scared you would. On account of me." His eyes grew wide. "Where's Ira?"

"Out. He'll be back soon." I hope.

She could tell from Jack's face he didn't believe her. Well, she'd never been able to tell a lie to Mike, either. But, Jack wasn't his father. Christ. It was stupid to even think that way. Mike's been gone fourteen years, for God's sake.

Sara reached over and gripped him by the shoulder for a minute and he came over to her and they sat there holding each other for some minutes.

She heard Ira before she saw him. He came in, sullen, a wildness in his eyes. Christ, he looked like Roni. How come she'd never seen it? And he was such a *little* kid, barely even there.

"Go on, Jack," she said softly. "Go on over to Kendall's. Stay there tonight."

Jack looked first at her, then at Ira, then nodded to himself and left.

The silence lay between Ira and Sara for some minutes.

"I came by to get my things," he said.

"Oh?" She inhaled and tried to think. What could she do? What the hell was going on in that small head?

"Yeah. I'm leaving. I ain't got no place here."

His eyes were just like Roni's. Stubborn, too. Just as stubborn as she was when she left.

She stubbed her cigarette out. "Look. I want you here. You're my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nephew. You're my blood. I want Gray here. Christ. But I'm not keeping anybody here who doesn't want to stay." His expression didn't change. I guess I wouldn't be convinced, either, she thought. She tried to be cool. "Your stuff's in your room. Gray's in my room, resting. You ought to say goodbye to him."

Ira snorted. "I don't want to. I'm getting out of here."

Something snapped in Sara. She grabbed Ira and pushed him down in the chair. "You little shit. What the hell do you think you're doing? Gray went out there to save your little ass."

"Gray killed my dragon. I wanted to get out of here."

"That thing was going to have you for lunch! Gray saved me. He saved you. And he was damned near killed doing it. You want to leave? Fine. You do it. You take your things and get the hell out. Somebody saves your life and you don't give a damn? Fine. You take your ungrateful, snotnosed face out of here. But you will thank him before you leave or I'll beat you black and blue. You got that? You hear me?"

He stared at her.

She sat back in the chair, ashamed. Aren't things bad enough without you shouting at a little boy? Tact. That's what you got in spades, Sara. "He's in there."

Ira stood up hesitantly, looked at the door to the cabin, then back at her. He touched the door, looked inside, entered the room.

She heard faint voices, harsh sounds. Suddenly, she felt as if everything would be all right. That, and a warmth and a strength she'd never felt before. It was like a kind of singing inside of her. She stepped outside and smelled the October sea air. It was brisk.

Gray and Ira didn't need her right then.

She walked down to Sam's boat and knocked on the railing. After a few minutes, Sam looked out.

"Hi," he said warily.

"Hello, there," she said cheerfully. "Want to dance?"

"Gray?" I said softly. "Are you here?"

"In front of you," he said. I'd never heard him tired before.

"Are you okay?"

He didn't say anything for a minute. "No."

I turned on the light. His chest was all over covered with that repair gunk, big deep gashes. Oh, God. And he looked so tired and shrunken, like his skin didn't fit him anymore. "Oh, Gray."

He reached out and drew me to his side and I started crying. He held me and I'd never felt so small and helpless, like I was a baby or broken or dead. "I never meant it, Gray. I never meant it. Don't go away." And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my Mama was there and my Papa and they'd all gone away and if Gray went away too there'd be nobody.

"Hush," he said in a croon. "Hush, Ira. I'm not going anywhere. I love you. Sara loves you. Nobody's leaving anybody."

I thought I heard Mama and Papa near me but I didn't look for them. I didn't need to.

Gray slowly grew warm and soft and he held me. He almost filled the bed and I had to scrunch up against the hull, but I didn't mind. After a while he looked down at me.

"What are the three loves?"

"Love of family, love of work, and love of duty." I sat up and looked at him right in those big eyes of his. "And always, *always,* in that order." ●

THE NIGHT SWIMMERS

Pocasset/Norton, 7/87

Down the black throat of the heavens
stars unreel in a long tepid swallow
bats dip from darker reaches for black flies
spiraling above us like obscuring dust
a loon releases its tremulous sigh
we dive through cool watery layers
the streamers stripping away our thoughts
leaving the vacuous dreams of astronauts

I surface along the galaxy's spine
in the pale starshine that stipples
the glassy plane of the lake
a boat ripples towards me
with ghostly green running lamps
we swim for a cabin of buttery light
the loon cries again and a meteor drops
in a fine-lined arc as if in answer

—Robert Frazier

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Vanciful

Araminta Station
By Jack Vance
Tor, $19.95

Rivers of purple ooze. A blue star called Blaise, or "The Blue-Eyed Devil." A pink-white sun in the sky of Soum.

Readers will immediately recognize the many-colored style of Jack Vance in those ingredients from his latest novel, *Araminta Station*. Has there ever been an SF author so fond of the sensuous? The colors of everything are given, the brighter the better. Meals are described in detail, costumes, also, down to the socks (and their color). Smells (often bad) loom large, and music plays frequently in the background.

And he loves to list names. Every gathering of more than two people seems to have to be named by individual, in Vance's often eccentric nomenclature: Kirdy Wook, Arles Clattuc, Uther Offaw, Jardine Laverty . . .

Araminta Station is a biggie, over five hundred pages long. And given the whimsical nature of Vance's writing, and the curiously coy quality of the dialogue—clever and stilted in equal parts—there are times when the reader feels s/he is drowning in a vat of marshmallow fluff.

But s/he keeps reading. Or at least this one did. For about two-thirds of the way, it would have been difficult to say why, even discounting the marshmallow factor, since it's an account of the goings-on of a group of adolescents on the world of Cadwal, a planet of the three-sun Purple Rose System of Mircea's Wisp, halfway along the Perseid Arm which is somewhere around Vance's familiar Gaean Reach (his galactic "geography" is amusing but confusing at times).

Cadwal had been established as a nature preserve by the Naturalist Society, a sort of future National Geographic Society, and its culture is comprised of three distinct sections: a community of Society fellows at Stroma, administrative personnel who live at Araminta Station, and the Yips of Yiptown, who are descendants of runaway servants, illegal immigrants, etc. The Yips appear to have an alien strain, and are treated as a source of menial labor by the others. The Yip population is growing prodigiously, though so far it has been confined to only the one community.

Our adolescent hero, Glawen, is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

followed through his teen years as he undergoes first love, struggles with the complicated social structure of Araminta Station, and has various rivalries with his peer group. It's sometimes like a male "Gidget goes Gaean" but there are certain sinister events. Glawen's lady love disappears and is presumed murdered. Glawen is a sort of Junior G-Man, working for Bureau B ("Patrols and surveys: police and security services"), and he discovers a particularly revolting tourist service operating out of Yiptown (which is a big tourist attraction). Vance chooses not to go into details (what a nice change from much of what's being published—someone deliberately choosing not to be revolting), but it seems a sort of snuff operation involving Yip girls.

Tracking down the perps of this operation, Glawen goes interstellar, checking out three more of Vance's peculiar planetary cultures. Things get pretty exciting and much is resolved to the reader's satisfaction (Vance has a neat habit of letting the good guys win in a direct and agreeable manner). But we are left with several cliffhangers: what happened to Glawen's father while he was away? Will Glawen's current female interest find the Society's charter, which seems to have disappeared, on Old Earth? Will the simmering political system on Cadwal explode?

The latter is the meat under the marshmallow (this simile is getting sick-making)—Vance isn't exactly known for social commentary, but the situation on Cadwal has some similarities in its clash of cultures to aspects of our present day society, and his handling of the situation (pending the anticipated sequel) will be found disturbing by some, I think. All the better; it's a relief to be disturbed by something aside from the repetitiveness of so much of what one reads lately.

Likable Lycanthrope

Wolf Moon
By Charles de Lint
NAL, $3.50 (paper)

Charles de Lint's *Wolf Moon* opens with Kern, a werewolf, hunted by a harper and the magical creature the harper has raised, a bear-like *feragh*. The two chase the werewolf over the cliff of a ravine, where it is washed away by the fierce mountain stream at the bottom.

Hurrah! We've gotten rid of the monster. But shouldn't that more likely be the end of a story than the beginning? Where do we go from here?

The answer is further downstream, in a remote valley beyond the mountains where the hunt had taken place. Peneghay Valley is part of the mythical kingdom of Thurin, but for a mythical kingdom, the inhabitants don't have too much truck with myths. Only the slightly retarded Wat at the Inn believes in the Kimeyn, the little folk, and nobody believes *him* when he offers them as the explanation of how the naked stranger ap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

peared on the river bank way above the waterline. (As for the tiny footprints leading from the water, well, er . . .)

However he got there, the kindly young woman who runs the Inn takes him in, and is soon in love with him. And the reader can't even feel the *frisson* of foreboding, because well before this it's become clear that Kern is a good guy, simply misunderstood and driven to wandering by his shapechanging abilities. (It was bad enough when his parents found out, but when his father headed into the village with a silver candlestick that he wanted to have changed into a lethal weapon, Kern felt it was time to leave home.)

But what about that harper? Harpers are *always* good guys, right? Wrong. This one has a mean streak, as well as mean magic in his harp, and dislikes shapechangers in particular. He tracks Kern, settles down in the valley for the winter, and starts singing songs and spreading tales about werewolves, which the valley-dwellers, despite their hard-headed view toward myths, begin to believe. Then he harps up his nasty feragh, which kills a couple of people rather messily. Now all the powerful harper has to do is see to it that Kern is revealed for what he is . . .

De Lint tells a simple tale (with a twist or two, as you can see) quite simply. This is something of a rarity and a pleasure these days, where a great many authors seem to be trying to outdo each other in complexity and obscurity (perhaps under the misapprehension that they are commiting originality). Oh, maybe the tale could use a few surprises aside from the basic twists. The Kimeyn get short shrift—they only have one scene, which is amusing enough to make you want to see more of them. The story proceeds inexorably—werewolf finds girl, werewolf loses girl, werewolf gets girl. And maybe the ending triumph of good is just a little *too* simple.

But it's still a nice story about nice people—de Lint is good at creating sympathetic characters, including werewolves—which makes a break from books where you have to work at figuring out whose side you're supposed to be on.

Alien Web

Chronosequence
By Hilbert Schenck
Tor, $17.95

A scientist who was born in New England and is teaching in Britain acquires at auction a mysterious hand-written journal by a psychic investigator of the nineteenth century. It tells of strange events on a small island off Nantucket. The creatures of the deep behave in mysterious ways, and there is some sort of presence on the island, called the Yoho by the locals. It is no accident that the manuscript has fallen into these particular hands, and the scientist is impelled to return to the small island, Muskeget, to find, perhaps, a visitor from the spaces beyond . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What is this? A lost story by H. P. Lovecraft? It has all the earmarks to begin with—American researcher in England, mysterious journals, ghostly presences from the past in New England.

But Hilbert Schenck, in *Chronosequence,* takes these always intriguing openers and goes off in directions old HPL never dreamed of, including a climax that *is* a climax involving an eternal orgasm, a concept that would have given the Victorian Mr. Lovecraft a severe case of the fantods.

What it is is another SF mystery, and curiously, it, too, has a female astronomer as protagonist. Eve Pennington is the American teaching in England, and when some unlikely types (including an elderly colleague) try all sorts of tricks to get the journal out of her hands, she starts her detective work (with the help of a likable young rare-book dealer).

It seems that she has had an experience on Muskeget in her youth, also. And it becomes more and more obvious that the journal has not fallen into her hands by accident—this has been set up in the most extraordinarily convoluted way.

At a farewell party (she is returning to America), Noel, another scientist, suddenly expounds on aliens stranded on Earth, claiming he has proof of such. For a moment you have the sinking feeling that this is going to be one of those plots (like a bad SF movie) where someone quite arbitrarily throws out a theory (from an infinity of possibilities) which just *happens* to fit the circumstances of the story, i.e., instant exposition.

But no. This is part of the web, too, and when Noel calls her Iphigenia, a sinister element is introduced. More strands are added, and there is the inevitable factor of the corporate/scientific community, which has also been putting two and two together about stranded aliens.

As it happens, only Eve will know what the alien wants and how to accomplish it. Schenck has a talent for making unlikely and disparate elements believable (including a healthy dose of nineteenth-century New England Americana). There is something endearing about his slightly confused academics and rare-book dealers trying hard to be detectives and CIA agents.

There is also a healthy amount of sexuality, in which even sisterly incest is handled delicately. And obviously sex plays a key role in the rousing climax mentioned above. All in all, it's an offbeat and very *human* novel about an alien web woven in strange and wonderful ways.

Metropolis Revisited

Metropolis
By Thea von Harbou
Donning, $19.95 (hardcover), $12.95 (paper)

A few days ago I was leaving an exhibition at the marvelous old Customs House in downtown Man-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hattan, at the Battery. There is a longish flight of stairs leading down from the inset entrance, covered by a high, relatively narrow arch. Standing at the top of the stairs, looking out through the arch, one sees a very small park, totally surrounded by skyscrapers built in the early part of the century. They are, in the style of skyscrapers from that period, decorated: columned, arched, corniced, tiered, and in one case even curved to fit the ancient New York street. At the very top of the opening through which this view was seen was the barest patch of gray sky; it was a misty, moisty day and the light was subdued, filtered and also gray. There was a sense of *déjà vu*. I suddenly thought, "My god, I'm in Metropolis."

The sets for Fritz Lang's film, which was inspired by the director's first sight of New York City, were hardly a copy of that city; nevertheless, the feeling of that period was absolutely caught. And that sudden vision I had of Metropolis in New York seemed an omen to finally read Thea von Harbou's novel, *Metropolis*, based on the script she co-wrote for her husband's film, which has just been reprinted.

It's enjoyable in two ways. If you have a taste for 1920s melodrama, it's a lot of fun. The prose (or at least the translation—no translator is listed for this edition) has the all-stops-pulled quality of the acting in the film. For instance, on the lovers' first kiss: "A wave carried him, him and the girl whom he held clasped to him as though he wished to die of it—and the wave came from the bottom of the ocean, roaring as the whole sea were an organ; and the wave was of fire and flung right up to the heavens." They don't write kisses like *that* anymore.

And if you know the film well, it does what every novel from a film (or from which a film was made) does—it fills in a lot of details; it's like learning more about friends or places that you thought you knew well.

For instance here there's a good deal about Rotwang's house, that mysterious Gothic edifice that stands out like a sore thumb in the movie. The house, in fact, is symptomatic of a peculiar strain of Germanic mysticism that runs through the novel, and fits there more comfortably than it does visually in the film.

There's an added bonus in this new edition: a host of drawings (many in color) by Michael W. Kaluta. It must have been a daunting assignment, to illustrate a subject already so very famous in visual terms, but Kaluta has handled it wonderfully. His style never wanders so far from that of the movie's designers so as to be jarring, but the drawings still have a highly different quality because of the graphic techniques employed. He has also chosen for the big drawings specific subjects and scenes which are not the big ones in the movie. The results are very beautiful indeed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Squid Pro Quo

Land's End

By Frederik Pohl & Jack Williamson

Tor, $18.95

Life is a good deal better for the webfeet of the Eighteen Cities than it is for the lubbers who live on the overcrowded land masses. The Eighteen Cities are underwater communities built on the floor of the ocean deeps; they subsist on farming and mining and trade with the lubbers, and, despite relatively limited space, they have more freedom and more room than any community on the overpopulated land.

Graciela Navarro, of City Atlantica on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, is training giant squid to run the city's farm equipment. Her star pupil tries to eat the ambassador from the despotic PanMack Empire which owns the Americas. It turns out that the really ugly bust (of himself) that the Ambassador is presenting to City Atlantica contains a small nuclear bomb, which is what affected the giant squid's behavior. The next question is why was the bust loaded?

The PanMacks, it seems, have discovered a lethally large comet heading toward Earth, and have revived their moribund space effort in an attempt to blast it to smithereens, but just in case *that* dosen't work, the Ambassador wanted a little leverage with the undersea city, which he figured would be a safer place to be if the comet hits.

However, the comet *is* blasted to smithereens, but the smithereens bring their own trouble. Not only do they do in the ozone layer, bringing on an ozone summer, but they initiate an EMP which knocks out most of the world's electronics. *Voilà!* Land's end!

Land's End, by Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson, is the kind of story those two pros can turn out on a manual typewriter with one hand tied behind their respective backs, better than those managed by many younger writers with both hands on a word processor. It's entertaining, with a background that's impeccably researched and clearly presented.

And they are not content to present us with a prime disaster novel which, unlike most other such, takes place in a neatly conceived future. There's also an inconceivably powerful alien which has been more or less in hibernation in the Atlantic for eons, and which is awakened by an expedition from City Atlantica. It tries to help, but its idea of help is not exactly what the dwindling human population of the globe would prefer, since it wants to gather their consciousnesses into itself and take off. Will humanity survive against the comet and the "Eternal"? Tune in to *Land's End* and find out.

Eyefull

Emerald Eyes

by Daniel Keys Moran

Bantam, $3.50 (paper)

There's a lot of underbrush to beat through before you can get into *Emerald Eyes* by Daniel Keys

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Moran. First there's a page and a half of dedication of the author's "life work" to what seems to be every author he's ever read. Perhaps a bit excessive, but one can forgive anyone that puts E. Nesbit and Edgar (sic—surely Edward?) Eager on such a list. Then there's *another* dedication, of this book in particular, to Moran's father. Then the novel itself opens with one of those half pages in italics—you know the kind—that begins with "I am the storyteller. Hear now my voice . . . "

Then the novel proper opens *sans* itals with a two-page section which is the first of many such brief bits through which the story is told—the first several introduce a number of characters in very little context, including one who announces "With a shower of gamma rays I came into existence at the fast end of time."

As with all such, you eventually twig into what's going on, and discover that Moran indeed has a story to tell, and in many ways a very good one. Not exactly a *new* one, though—it's the one about a variant species of humanity (telepathic, in this case) subjected to persecution in a future (twenty-first century, here) society.

The story is full of intrigue, excitingly presented against an original and well-thought-out background: the U.N. (with the French in the lead) has taken over, against Russia, Japan, and the U.S., which is more or less a conquered country. The telepaths were genetically engineered (they're called "genies," a nice touch) to act as information gatherers for the U.N. "Peaceforcers" and as the novel opens, have just legally won their freedom from what amounts to indenture to the U.N. There are several hundred of them by now, most still adolescents.

There are also good out-of-left-field gimmicks: another alternate race, gene-spliced from human and cougar; a wild, self-aware program, loose in the world infonet, created to and determinedly set on aiding American interests; and the aforementioned story teller/time traveler, who observes and meddles in the action. And the characters (once you've sorted them out) are a varied lot, well above two-dimensional.

All this good stuff, however, is undercut by Moran's tendency to try to put too much into too few words. You have the feeling that you're reading a sequel where some vital information hasn't carried over (in fact, this is the first of a planned thirty-three volume epic, according to the "Afterword"), the result of too many good ideas in not enough space. For once, here is a novel that you want more, not less, of—several of the themes cry for expanded exposition. And the time-traveling narrator ends up a complete mystery, undoubtedly to be explained somewhere in the next thirty-two volumes but for the time being (as it were) a distraction from the main plot.

How much the novel's frag-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mented form adds to this problem, I'm not sure. If all the ideas were crystal clear, it would probably be a perfectly good way to tell the story. As it stands, it certainly doesn't help.

Despite this, *Emerald Eyes* is an exciting novel with (too) many neat ideas, and one can only hope that the ensuing volumes slow down a little and give the ideas their due.

Arch Druids

Druid's Blood

By Esther M. Friesner
NAL, $3.50 (paper)

I, for one, am getting a little tired of pastiches and spinoffs on Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper (of whom we can expect to hear still more, given the centenary), even when they're as complex and clever as Esther M. Friesner's *Druid's Blood*.

This one takes place in an alternate nineteenth century in an alternate England ruled by druidical magic. This has come about because the Romans didn't conquer Britain, having been defeated by good King Bran who has been provided with the magical Rules Britannia, the volume of stolen sorcerous lore which for the next 1800 years will protect the British Isles from invasion. It also has set up a society which is a magical theocracy, ruled by Druids.

The protagonist is one John H. Weston, M.D., who has written some stories about a detective for the *Strand* magazine. Suddenly his life is invaded by one Brihtric Donne (aka Sherbourne Rath) who assumes all the aspects of Weston's fictional detective. The two are soon involved in a Royal Scandal. The lovely young queen, Victoria, who has apparently inherited the throne from her Uncle George with no intervening William, the sailor King (well, it *is* an alternative history), can't find the Rules Britannia. They have, in fact, been stolen, as she discovers when she looks for them in the magic fire; she needs them to figure out the rules for installing John as her consort after bedding him on Beltane in the year-king rites (this Victoria is no Victorian!).

All sorts of historical characters are involved in the frantic and complicated events that follow. The Duke of Wellington appears as the Arch Druid. Sarah Bernhardt performs *Hamlet* in the nude. Lord Byron has been Victoria's former Year King. A Doctor Arthur Elric Boyle who is interested in spiritualism shows up. (Elric. Conan. Get it?) The two doctors go to a restaurant called Renfield's, recommended by a Mr. Stoker, where they are bothered by flies. Even Charles II makes an appearance. And there's the abovementioned Jack.

It would be neither fair nor feasible to list all the characters and events involved in solving the case of the missing Rules. (Oh, yes, throw in some dragons, an afrit or two, and some hobgoblins.) It certainly goes lickety-split, and the major problem is that the goofy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

puns and people fit rather uneasily with the very complicated druidical alternative which Ms. Friesner has devised, which has enough depth for a more serious treatment.

10

The Mammoth Book of Classic Science Fiction: Short Novels of the 1930s

Edited by Isaac Asimov, Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg
Carroll & Graf, $8.95 (paper)

Hang in there, gentle reader —this will take a while. I've got ten novels to review in this one space. Well, they were published as novels, but they're really shorter than what we now word-count as such. This is because they were published back in the days when you bought science fiction at the magazine stand instead of the book store.

Because of space limitations, the short form was almost *de rigueur* (though the braver editors would give their readers credit for a longer attention span by publishing the occasional serial); the longest story in an issue was often billed as a "novel."

This particular accident of history has made the works of many authors of the 1930s and '40s impossible to find, since the short novel has no place to go these days to be reprinted. (Modern publishers, leery of reprints to begin with, have trouble with stories too short to make a book alone, and too long to make a collection of more than two or three.) This has even accounted for the eclipse of major authors, the bulk of whose work was at this length—Henry Kuttner comes immediately to mind.

Therefore, an anthology of ten of these short novels is like a trove of lost treasure, and let's consider as many as possible given *our* space limitations:

John W. Campbell, Jr.'s "Who Goes There" is a classic, and proves itself even more so on rereading. What an amazing combination of suspense and classic puzzle SF! In it, everybody's life (not to mention civilization) hangs on solving the riddle of determining *who* in the Antarctic expedition is human and who is a chameleon-like monster which can imitate *human* in every possible way.

H. P. Lovecraft's "The Shadow Out of Time" was published in *Astounding* (now *Analog*) of all places. Though it's embroidered with HPL's usual unthinkable horrors, it gives them a solid (for the period) science fictional base, and is prime proof that much of what he wrote *was* SF. Ten-foot high pyramidal beings with claws and tentacles inhabited the Earth before man, mastering time well enough to exchange conciousnesses with beings across the time scale for the purpose of collecting knowledge.

Our hero, a professor of political economy at good old Miskatonic U., suffers such an exchange, comes back after five years with his memories of the "Great Race" wiped, suffers nightmares, and finds proof that his "hallucinations" were true.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This "novel" is also exceptional for Lovecraft in being more coherently cosmic than most of his ambiguous conceptions.

It's said that Murray Leinster was the first SF author to deal with the parallel universe idea, in "Sideways In Time." He didn't do it in any low-key sort of way, either —here, the idea is all, and the story is mostly a montage of various parallel times sliding into our own during some sort of ultracosmic catastrophe. Only the barest nod is made to plot and characters, but who cares? It's still a lot of fun.

Another sort of first appeared in Stanley Weinbaum's "Dawn of Flame," perhaps the initial "realistic" view of a post-holocaust culture pulling itself together again —there's action and melodrama, of course, but also the kind of detail that has influenced every such story since.

Jack Williamson is represented —where have you heard that name recently? Yes, co-authoring a *new* book reviewed above. An amazing career—here his "Wolves of Darkness" gives us some really nasty aliens from the "Black Dimension" that are establishing a beachhead in the bodies of wolves—and hapless heroines.

L. Sprague de Camp is also still active—he is represented by the classic "Divide & Rule" in which an Earth conquered by aliens less nasty than funny (they look like kangaroos) is reduced to a sort of neo-feudalism, with knights careering about in custom-made Ford armor.

Of the others, Horace L. Gold's "A Matter of Form" has a mad surgeon switching personalities and a man in the body of a collie desperately trying to communicate his plight; Cornell Woolrich's dark-hued and rather sordid melodrama, "Jane Brown's Body," is about another surgeon who conquers death with unfortunate results; "Alas, All Thinking" by Harry Bates (who wrote the story from which "The Day the Earth Stood Still" derived) takes a wry look at an intellectual future humanity; and in "Seeker of Tomorrow" by Eric Frank Russell and Leslie T. Johnson, an expedition returns to Venus from a long-dead Earth some 150,000 years in the future, bringing with them a sample of twenty-first-century man.

All are adequately written, a couple (such as the Campbell) more than that. In some the scientific content will seem laughably simple to us now. But with what pizzazz the melodramatic action-oriented plots are spun, and there is always the sense of adventure in concept. The Introduction to this volume points out that part of the success of *Astounding* was its emphasis on stories featuring startling new ideas, or variations on old ones. Today's magazines struggle to carry on that worthy ideal, but the book publishers might learn the lesson that not every story has to be in the vein of something that's come before.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Much Adoolittle

The Story of Doctor Doolittle &
The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle
By Hugh Lofting
Dell Yearling, $2.95 & $3.50
respectively (paper)

Those of us who read fantasy before it became a mass medium in the past decade can remember the constant search for anything with magic in it, and particularly those juvenile fantasies which fed that hunger often long after we ceased to be children. Almost all of us over a certain age have a shared heritage of "juvenile" fantasies painfully sought out in the children's rooms of libraries, those wonderful repositories of books that made available to us not only recently-published literature, but treasures from earlier in the century.

Certainly among that company, Hugh Lofting's Doctor Doolittle books took an honored, if not pre-eminent place. No, don't give me Rex Harrison—that admirable, lean, sophisticated actor was no more the rotund, simple Doctor Doolittle than Julie Andrews was Mary Poppins, or that poor llama with an extra head pasted on was the real pushmi-pullyu.

There are eight books about the nineteenth-century country doctor who learned the languages of the animals, and thereupon had many extraordinary adventures. They are now coming back into print after having been unavailable for ten years or so. Lofting, writing in the 1920s, used accepted conventions of his time in the same way that Mark Twain did in writing about *his*; the new editions of the Doolittle books have been revised, to protect the sensitivities of those who have no historical perspective. If that be the only way they can be reprinted, I guess it's worth it (no major damage seems to have been done); one just wonders what perfectly ordinary things written today will cause screams of outrage in the *next* century and will have to be changed accordingly.

The first book in the series, *The Story of Doctor Doolittle*, is pretty simple-minded; as with several other series, particularly the Narnia books, the author started out on a *very* juvenile level, and then apparently decided that children were more sophisticated than given credit for. But it gives the genesis of the Doolittle saga—how the mid-nineteenth-century MD from Puddleby-on-the-Marsh, who liked animals better than people, kept losing patients because of his domestic menagerie ("... an old lady with rheumatism ... sat on the hedgehog who was sleeping on the sofa ... and never came to see him anymore ..."). The household is saved from ruin by the parrot Polynesia, who teaches the doctor basic animal languages; he becomes famed far and wide as an animal doctor. His services are requested by the monkeys of Africa, who are suffering a plague (word is brought by porpoises), and he is off on an adventurous voyage in which he meets with pirates, fierce natives, and the two-headed pushmi-pullyu.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Volume two—"The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle"—is a quantum leap in sophistication, but the basic charm and humor remain. The Doctor acquires an apprentice *cum* Boswell, the young Thomas Stubbins, who tells the story (and all the subsequent ones).

In this one he journeys to South America in search of the *other* greatest naturalist in the world, the Indian Long Arrow. There he finds a lost tribe living on a floating island, which has gotten into a southward current and is rapidly heading toward Antarctica. Whales save the day, the island becomes permanently anchored, and we meet the giant sea snail, in whose enormous transparent pink shell the doctor and his party return to Puddleby.

In later volumes, the Doctor goes as far afield as the Moon. Don't expect the high fantasy of a Tolkien or Lewis, but for a delightful escape into a simpler world, the Doolittle books merit a return visit if you haven't reread them for a while. And the author's many naïve drawings are equally enchanting.

FYI

The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction
Edited by James Gunn
Viking, $24.95

When a major new reference work appears, no matter how perspicacious the reviewer, there's usually no way to judge its ultimate worth until one has used it for a year or so. So all one can do (except wait a year to review it) is to call attention to its publication and some of its more obvious aspects.

The entries in *The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* edited by James Gunn have been, perhaps sensibly, limited almost entirely to only three categories—persons (mostly writers, some artists, actors, etc.), film titles, and essays on general themes ("Pulp Magazines," "Fandom," "Galactic Empires" et al.) with a few miscellaneous others such as major magazines. I would guess (without making a count) that this results in fewer entries overall than Peter Nicholls' definitive *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* of a decade ago. But it is, of course, a decade more up-to-date, a decade of great change in the field.

One might question the amount of space devoted to individual films (a full column on *The Day the Earth Caught Fire,* a neat little film, *but* . . .). However, this reflects the fact that SF has come to be regarded as a film medium, and science fiction viewers probably outnumber science fiction readers at this point. The film pieces also seem to be less academically objective than those devoted to the literary side. And perhaps some of the general-theme essays are a little trendy ("Music and Music Video"?).

Minor quibbles aside, however, this new reference aid is a serious effort at filling a current need, and is welcome as such.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shoptalk

An anthology of more than usual interest to comment on: *Terry's Universe,* edited by Beth Meacham, is a tribute to the late Terry Carr, SF editor *extraordinaire.* All the stories have been donated by the authors and all the proceeds will go to Carr's widow. Contributors include Le Guin, Leiber, Silverberg, Wolfe, and other stars in Terry's universe (Tor, $16.95).

Speaking of Robert Silverberg, three of his early novels have been issued in one volume. These were among the lot that made one realize there was a major talent at work in the late '60s and early '70s: *The Masks of Time, Born With the Dead,* and the memorable *Dying Inside* (Bantam, $4.95, paper). Hitchhiker fans will want to know about *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion,* which has been put together by Neil Gaiman. It's really more of a history of the series in its various aspects than a "guide" *per se* (Pocket Books, $7.95, paper).

Those of us who were enchanted by Barry Hughart's *Bridge of Birds* are more than happy to see *The Story of the Stone,* another Master Li (masterly?) novel (Doubleday, $17.95). Terry Bisson's *Talking Man* was a genuine original in the field of fantasy, devoted to automotives and magic in equal part. He has a new novel, *Fire On the Mountain* (Arbor House, $15.95) and his first, *Wyrldmaker,* has been reprinted (Avon, $2.95, paper).

On the reprint front, one can't really count David Gerrold's classic novel of artificial intelligence, *When HARLIE was One,* since Gerrold has rewritten it incorporating current technology. I'll leave it to the readers to decide if the new version (called *When HARLIE was One: Release 2.0* in its new incarnation) is an improvement—one always gets nervous when a good novel is redone (Bantam, $3.95, paper).

Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* is another one of those novels that should never be out of print. It was probably SF's first excursion into physical bisexuality, even anticipating Le Guin's revolutionary *The Left Hand of Darkness.* However, the publisher, whom I have praised before for its noteworthy reprint program, has come a real cropper on this one with the most hilariously inapropos cover I've seen for years. It's straight off a mid-century pulp (and though Sturgeon was a mid-century writer, and wrote for mid-century pulps, he was far from what one thinks of as a mid-century pulp writer), showing a bosomy lady in a backless brass bathing suit riding a tea-tray. Anyone who knows the novel will realize just how far off-base this is (Carroll & Graf, $3.95, paper).

There's no way in the world to keep you people up on sequels and series (I'd guess about every other book that comes in at this point can be characterized as one or the other), but in passing let's note the eighteenth (!) Horse Clan book by Robert Adams, *Clan of the Cats* (NAL,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

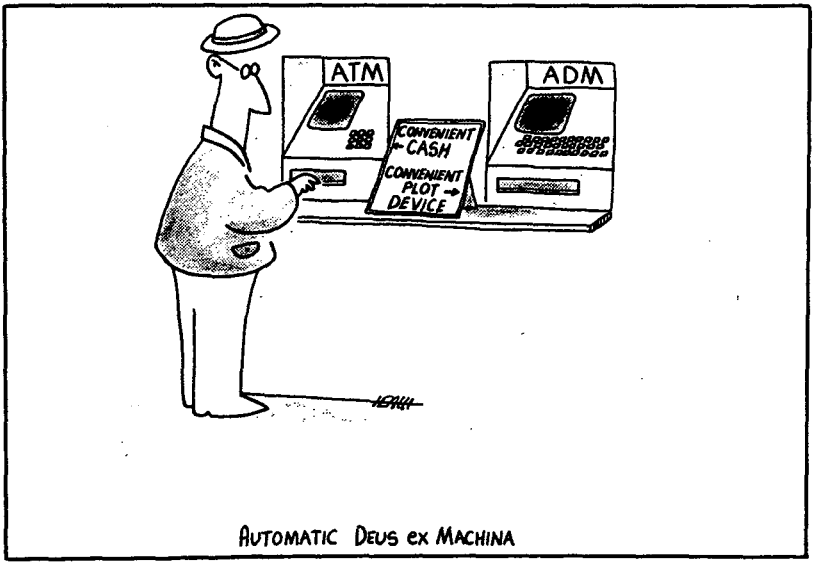
$3.50, paper) and the twenty-fifth (!!) Gor book to pulse from John Norman's pen, *Magicians of Gor* (DAW, $4.95, paper).

And for the bibliographical and feminist minded, there's *More Than 100 Women Science Fiction Writers: An Annotated Bibliography* edited by Sharon Yntema, the title of which is self-explanatory (The Crossing Press, $39.95).

Peter Dickinson's very peculiar "Changes trilogy" has been released in mass-market paperback in the "young adult" category. I can't really quibble with that designation, but for those who really like very well-written oddball fantasies, these are a must. They start off as SF, in a future reverted to pre-industrial-revolutionary status, and end up as off-the-wall Arthurian. The three are *The Devil's Children, Heartsease,* and *The Weathermonger* (Dell Laurel-Leaf, $2.95 each, paper).

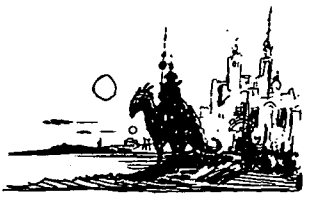
Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Fifth Annual Collection,* edited by Gardner Dozois, (St. Martin's Press, $12.95, paper); *Azazel,* by Isaac Asimov (Doubleday, $16.95); *The Great SF Stories #18,* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg, DAW, $4.50 (paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014. ●



AUTOMATIC DEUS ex MACHINA

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



NEXT ISSUE

Charles Sheffield returns to these pages next month with our February cover story, "Destroyer of Worlds." This one starts off quietly enough, with the discovery of a very unusual kind of postage stamp—but that turns out to be only the first clue in the unraveling of a scientific mystery that leads Sheffield's characters on a wild and suspenseful hunt from Philadelphia to the remote hills of the Colorado wilderness, and ultimately brings them face to face with a deadly enigma that could spell the end of all life on Earth; don't miss this breathtaking high-tech thriller. **Judith Moffett**—who, as I write these words, has just won the John W. Campbell Award as Best New Writer of 1987—is also on hand for February, and offers us a disaster story of another sort, a very personal sort, in the powerful and deeply-moving "Tiny Tango," likely to be one of the most talked-about and controversial stories of the year.

ALSO IN FEBRUARY: **George Alec Effinger** takes us sideways in time, to the American Civil War as it *might* have been, for a thrilling and deadly race against time itself, in "Everything but Honor"; new writer **Lia Mason** returns with a fascinating study of a *very* unusual protagonist, a streetwise bike messenger who may hold the fate of the Earth in her hands, in "The Oniomancer"; new writer **Allen M. Steele** spins a wry and entertaining tale of a daring space mission that is most definitely *not* Officially Authorized, in the sprightly "Free Beer and the William Casey Society"; and **Steven Utley** returns to these pages with his first new story in ten years, an icy, elegant, and brutal little shocker called "My Wife." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstands on January 10, 1989.

COMING UP IN 1989: another great year of *IAsfm stories! Stick with us through the coming year, and see why* stories from *IAsfm* have won twelve Nebula Awards, nine Hugo Awards, and two World Fantasy Awards in the last six years. See why *IAsfm* placed a record nine stories on this year's Final Nebula Ballot, and an utterly unprecedented *thirteen* items on this year's Final Hugo Ballot... as well as more stories on the *Locus* Reader's Poll than all other short-fiction sources *combined.* See why *Locus* has said that "*Asimov's* clearly is *the* magazine for short fiction" and called us "the flagship of progressive science fiction," and why *The Austin Chronicle* called us "the most consistently innovative and readable SF magazine on the newsstands today." Why not subscribe *now* (using the coupon you'll find on page 63), be sure to miss none of our 1989 issues... and see for yourself what all the excitement is about!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

INDEX

This index covers Volume 12 of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* January 1988 through Mid-December 1988. Entries are arranged alphabetically by author. When there is more than one entry for an author, listings are arranged chronologically in order of appearance in the magazine. All entries are followed by a paranthetical note. These notes are: (a) article; (c) cartoon; (e) editorial; (n) novelette; (na) novella; (p) poem; (r) review; and (s) short story. Collaborations are listed under all authors and are cross-referenced. When a title, a paranthetical note, or an author's name is omitted, it is the same as that of the previous entry.

Asimov, Isaac "Suicide" (e) .. Jan 4
——"Judgment" (e) ..... Feb 4
——"Glasnost" (e) ..... Mar 4
——"Eccentricity" (e) ..... Apr 4
——"Flight of Fancy" (s) ..... May 96
——"Fantastic Voyage II" (e) May 4
——"Taxes" (e) ..... Jun 4
——"Psychohistory" (e) ..... Jul 4
——"Acrophobia" (e) ..... Aug 4
——"Surprise" (e) ..... Sep 4
——"Ownership?" (e) ..... Oct 4
——"Frivolity" (e) ..... Nov 4
——"I Love Little Pussy" (s) . Nov 46
——"Contemporaries" (e) .... Dec 4
——"Feminism" (e) ..... Mid-D 4
——"Christmas Without Rodney" (s) ..... Mid-D 18

Barnes, John "Under the Covenant Stars" (n) ..... Apr 88
——"The Limit of Vision" (na) Jul 118
Barrett, Jr., Neal "Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus" (n) .. Feb 86
——"Stairs" (s) ..... Sep 82
Bell, M. Shayne "Nicoji" (n) .. Mar 103
Bishop, Michael "The Calling of Paisley Coldpony" (n) .... Jan 86
Boston, Bruce "The Sizing of Curses" (p) ..... May 109
Branham, R.V. "Lady with Teddy Bear" (s) ..... Dec 40

Cadigan, Pat "My Brother's Keeper" (n) ..... Jan 18
Card, Orson Scott "Dowser" (n) Dec 74
Costello, Matthew J. "Gaming" (a) Jan 17
—— ..... Feb 10
—— ..... Mar 1
—— ..... Apr 1
—— ..... May 1
—— ..... Jun 1
——"1987 Science Fiction Games of the Year" (a) .. Jul 1
——"Gaming" (a) ..... Jul 1
—— ..... Aug 1
—— ..... Sep 1
—— ..... Oct 1
—— ..... Nov 1
—— ..... Dec 2
—— ..... Mid-D 1

Dann, Jack "Tea" (n)..... Apr 6
Davidson, Avram "El Vilvoy de las Islas" (n) ..... Aug 8
——"One Morning with Samuel, Dorothy, and William" (s) ..... Mid-D 6
Devlin "Elric-Of-Melnibone" (c) Mar 4
——"No One Was Sure" (c) . Apr 7
——"I've Always Assumed" (c) ..... Aug 3
——"Allegory and Fable," (c) Dec 17
——"Our Friend, Mr. Electricity" (c) ..... Mid-D 13
Dozois, Gardner "2nd Annual Readers' Award Results" (a) ..... Aug 8
Dutcher, Roger "Dying In Other Worlds: Cocteau" (p) ..... Apr 181
——"Mythology to Ann" (p) . Oct 184

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ellison, Harlan "The Function of Dream Sleep" (s) ..... Mid-D 154

Farber, Sharon N. "The Last Thunder Horse West of the Mississippi" (n) ..... Nov 20
Feeley, Gregory "A Different Drumstick" (s) ..... Nov 106
Flair "Insurance Fraud" (c) .... Aug 111
Fowler, Karen Joy "Lily Red" (s) ..... Jul 80
Frazier, Robert "Dream Operator" (p) ..... Feb 57
——"Tags" (s) ..... Apr 85
——"Weltanschauung" (p) ... Jul 108
——"Retrovision" (s) ..... Aug 124
——"A Letter from Polar Mars" (p) ..... Dec 73
——"Damage Report" (p) .... Dec 166
——"At a Worksite in the Ruins of Ganymede" (p) ..... Mid-D 153
Friesner, Esther M. "Wake Up Call" (s) ..... Dec 108
Frost, Gregory "Lizaveta" (n) . Mid-D 82

Gerberg, Mort "Item: Stephen King Announces" (c) ..... Nov 119
Gilliland, Alexis "I Don't Like Flying. . ." (c) ..... Nov 133
Green, Terence M. and Andrew Weiner "Twenty-Two Steps to the Apocalypse" (s) ... Jan 118
Goldstein, Lisa "After the Master" (s) ..... May 134
——"Death is Different" (s) ... Sep 114
Goulart, Ron "Here Comes Bunky" (s) ..... Dec 122
Gunn, Eileen "Stable Strategies for Middle Management" (s) ..... Jun 58

Heiser "Ye Olde Book Shoppe" (c) ..... May 95

Jablokov, Alexander "Deathbinder" (n) ..... Feb 106
——"Many Mansions" (n) .... May 20
Jennings, Phillip C. "The Bishop's Decision" (s) ... Mar 46
——"Messiah" (n) ..... Jun 80
Jones, Gwyneth "The Eastern Succession" (n) ..... Feb 34

Joron, Andrew "Living with Nuclear Weapons" (p) ..... Nov 45

Kelly, James Patrick "Home Front" (s) ..... Jun 20
——"Lepidopteran" (p) ..... Dec 107
Kessel, John "Mrs. Shummel Exits a Winner" (s) ..... Jun 101
Koja, Kathe "Distances" (n) ... Mid-D 64
Kress, Nancy "Craps" (s) ..... Mar 93
——"In Memoriam" (s) ..... Jun 112

Landis, Geoffrey A. "Vacuum States" (s) ..... Jul 73
——"Ripples in the Dirac Sea" (s) ..... Oct 86
Leigh, Stephen "Evening Shadow" (s) ..... Aug 72

Mason, Lisa "Guardian" (n) .. Oct 98
——"Deus Ex Machina" (n) .. Dec 136
McAllister, Bruce "Songs from a Far Country" (n) ..... Feb 58
McDevitt, Jack "Sunrise" (n) . Mar 18
——"Last Contact" (s) ..... Jun 36
McDonald, Ian "King of Morning, Queen of Day" (n) ... May 110
McGarry, Terry "The One that Got Away" (p) ..... Nov 61
Milán, Victor "Brass" (s) ..... Nov 120
Moffett, Judith "The Hob" (n) May 60
——"Them And Us" (p) ..... Aug 70
——"Wild Child" (p) ..... Mid-D 26
Mueller, Richard "Meditations on the Death of Cortes" (s) ..... Sep 68
Murphy, Pat "Good-bye, Cynthia" (s) ..... Apr 118

Niemand, O. "Put Your Hands Together" (s) ..... Feb 18

Pohl, Frederik "Waiting for the Olympians" (na) ..... Aug 144
Popkes, Steven "The Color Winter" (s) ..... Aug 112

Rettig, Hillary "Through Alien Eyes" (s) ..... Jul 109
Robinson, Kim Stanley "Glacier" (n) ..... Sep 94
——"The Lunatics" (n) ..... Mid-D 28

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Russo, Richard Paul "Listen to My Heartbeat" (s) ..... Jan 60

Searles, Baird "On Books" (r) .. Feb 177
—— ..... Apr 183
—— ..... May 184
—— ..... Jul 184
—— ..... Aug 184
—— ..... Oct 185
—— ..... Dec 167
Sheffield, Charles "The Courts of Xanadu" (n) ..... Apr 20
Shepard, Lucius "The Scale-hunter's Beautiful Daughter" (na) ..... Sep 128
——"Nomans Land" (na) ..... Oct 20
——"The Way It Sometimes Happens" (s) ..... Dec 57
Shirley, John "Shaman" (n) .. Nov 76
Silverberg, Robert "At Winter's End" (na) ..... Jan 130
——"Gilgamesh in Uruk" (na) Jun 118
——"We Are for the Dark" (na) ..... Oct 122
Smith, D. Alexander "Dying in Hull" (s) ..... Nov 62
Soukup, Martha "Having Keith" (s) ..... Jun 70
Spinrad, Norman "Emperor of Everything" (r) ..... Jan 173
——"The Hard Stuff" (r) ..... Mar 177
——"The Strange Case of J.G. Ballard" (r) ..... Jun 178
——"New and Interesting" (r) Nov 178
——"The Graphic Novel" (r) . Mid-D 176
Steele, Allen M. "Live from the Mars Hotel" (s) ..... Mid-D 106
Strauss, Erwin S. "The SF Conventional Calendar" ..... Jan 192
—— ..... Feb 192
—— ..... Mar 192
—— ..... Apr 192
—— ..... May 192
—— ..... Jun 192
—— ..... Jul 192
—— ..... Aug 192
—— ..... Sep 192
—— ..... Oct 192
—— ..... Nov 192
—— ..... Dec 176
—— ..... Mid-D 192
Sullivan, Tim "Father to the Man" (n) ..... Oct 68
Sucharitkul, Somtow "The Madonna of the Wolves" (na) ..... Nov 134
Swanwick, Michael "A Midwinter's Tale" (s) ..... Dec 22

Tem, Melanie "Chameleon" (s) Mar 129
Tiptree, Jr., James "The Earth Doth Like a Snake Renew" (n) ..... May 146
Turtledove, Harry "Trapping Run" (na) ..... Feb 126
——"Freedom" (na) ..... Mar 140

Vinicoff, Eric "The Great Martian Railroad Race" (s) ..... Aug 18

Waldrop, Howard "Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance" (n) ... Aug 38
Watson, Ian "The Flies of Memory" (na) ..... Sep 16
——"Joan's World" (s) ..... Mid-D 138
Webb, Don "Common Superstitions" (s) ..... Oct 116
Weiner, Andrew "The Grandfather Problem" (s) ..... Aug 108
Weiner, Andrew and Terence M. Green "Twenty-Two Steps to the Apocalypse" (s) ... Jan 118
Whitlock, Dean "Winter Solstice" (s) ..... Dec 63
Wilber, Rick "Suffer the Children" (s) ..... Apr 78
Wilder, Cherry "The House on Cemetery Street" (n) ..... Dec 114
Williams, Walter Jon "Surfacing" (na) ..... Apr 126
——"Flatline" (s) ..... Aug 135
Willis, Connie "Ado" (s) ..... Jan 78
——"The Last of the Winnebagos" (na) ..... Jul 18
Wolverton, Dave "The Sky is an Open Highway" (n) ..... Jul 94
Wylde, Thomas "The Cage of Pain" (n) ..... Mar 72
Yolen, Jane "The Quiet Monk" (s) ..... Mar 60
——"Sir John Mandeville's Report On The Griffin" (p) .. May 58
——"The Cow Who Jumped" (p) ..... Sep 61

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE'S

Third Annual Readers' Award

Good Grief, January again *already?* Hard to believe, but the days have gone whizzing by, and here's our January issue again—and *that* means that it's time for our Third Annual Readers' Award poll.

Voting has been heavy in past years, and we hope that everyone who responded last year will vote this year as well.

This is our chance to hear from *you;* that's the whole idea behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* last year? This is your chance to let us know!

Over the years, our readers have never been shy about letting us know, informally, just which stories in the magazine they found to be the most exciting and thought-provoking. Now's your chance to let us know formally, by ballot, which stories *you* thought were the best published in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1988. This is *your* chance to tell *us* what novella, novelette, short story, cover art, and interior art you liked best last year. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *IAsfm* (pp. 186-188) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations. Only material from 1988-dated issues of *IAsfm* is eligible. And only material that was actually published *in IAsfm* is eligible (you may think that this is so elementary that it goes without saying, but you should have seen some of the ballots we've received in the past!), so don't bother sending us nominations for stories published in *Analog,* let *alone*—Heaven Forfend!—stories published in *other* companies' magazines. All ballots must be postmarked no later than Feb. 1, 1989, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue. Vote today!

BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

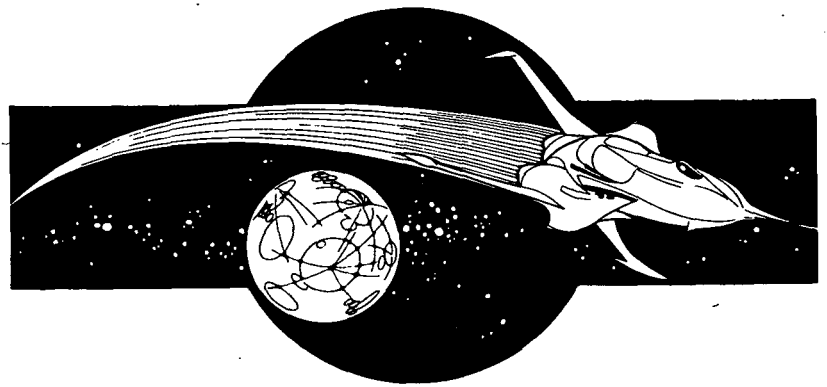
BEST COVER ARTIST:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Classified Marketplace

ISAAC ASIMOV/ANALOG combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $8.25 per word—payable in advance—($123.75 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

SCIENCE Fiction/Fantasy. Free catalog of Pulps, Digests, Paperbacks, Hardcovers. Collections also Purchased. Ray Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, Indiana 46032.

EARLY SCIENCE FICTION & Offtrail Pulps featured in monthly 17-page mail-in-bid auction catalogue. Plus movie memorabilia, comics, animation art. 450 items pictured/described. Current issue $2.00. Collectors Showcase, 1708 N. Vine, Hollywood, CA 90028.

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265.

FREE CATALOG: Filk and folk music. Oddities for SF/Fantasy Fen. Quicksilver Fantasies, W1400 Ironhorse Dr., #11-A, Post Falls, ID 83854.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS—Cont'd

BUY, Sell, Trade, Hardbound and Pulps, $2 for Huge Catalog. Graham Holroyd, 19 Borrowdale Dr., Rochester, NY 14626.

SF/Horror for less! Catalog $1.00 Refundable. T. D. Bell, Leahy Lane, Ballston Spa, 12020.

DRAGONS

CELEBRATE 1988. Magic Year of the Dragon! Greatest selection of dragons. T-shirts, stationery, sculptures, posters, rubber stamps, belt buckles, etc. 20-page catalog and holographic sticker—$2.00. Dancing Dragon Designs—AN, 1881 Fieldbrook, Arcata, CA 95521.

EDUCATION & INSTRUCTION

HARNESS WITCHCRAFT POWERS. We teach you how. Gavin and Yvonne, Box 1502-IA, Newbern, NC 28560.

YOU'LL MAKE MONEY

SAVE MONEY TOO— BY READING and ANSWERING THESE CLASSIFIED ADS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With the holiday lull, a chance to look ahead into next year. Glasnost leads to several cons in Eastern Europe. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me a SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Phone most cons in early evening. When writing cons, enclose a SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons. as Filthy Pierre.

DECEMBER, 1988

2-4—**EastWorldCon.** For info, write: **Andrew Szatkowski, Ul. DuBois 12m45, Warsaw 00-188, Poland.** Or call: **(48) 91-23-04-04** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Warsaw, Poland (if city omitted, same as in address). 2d annual East-bloc con. Guests will include: Western exhibitors.

2-4—**TropiCon.** Surf Hotel, Ft. Lauderdale FL. Poul & Karen Anderson, Walt & Madeleine Willis.

9-11—**SMOFCon.** Hyatt Regency, Phoenix AZ. Annual con where people who run cons talk shop. $50.

30-Jan. 1—**EveCon, Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001. (703) 360-2292.** Washington DC. College-age folk.

JANUARY, 1989

6-8—**HexaCon, % Newrock, 559 Kingwood-Locktown Rd., Flemington NJ 08822.** N. Springer, Blanchard.

20-22—**ConFusion, % AASFA, Box 8284R, Ann Arbor MI 48107.** Southfield MI. About 1,000 expected.

27-29—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311.** Springfield MA. Tim Powers.

FEBRUARY, 1989

3-5—**SFeraCon, % SFera, Ivanicgradska 41 A, Zagreb 41000, Yugoslavia.** Long-time East bloc con.

3-5—**CzarKon, 1156 Remley Ct., Univ. City MO 63130. (314) 725-6448.** St. Louis MO. Adults only.

24-26—**Contemplation, Box 7242, Columbia MO 65205. (314) 442-8135.** M. Lackey, D. L. Anderson.

24-26—**MicroCon, % Richmond Hunt, 51 Danes Rd., Exeter, Devon. EX4 4LS, UK.** On-campus con.

MARCH, 1989

3-5—**CaveCon, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134.(502) 586-3366.** At Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. $70 to 3/15/89.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $60 to 12/1/88.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** NASFiC. $55 until mid-1989.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Take any 5 books for $1

with membership

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

4861 Pub. ed. $16.95
Club ed. $5.98

0265 Pub. ed. $18.95
Club ed. $5.98

0810 Spec. ed.▲
Club ed. $5.98

★ **0778** Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $4.98

1305 Pub. ed. $18.95
Club ed. $6.50

3525 Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $4.98

3814 Spec. ed.▲
Club ed. $10.98

0504 Spec. ed.▲
Club ed. $4.98

0141 Pub. ed. $16.95
Club ed. $4.98

7245 Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $6.98

0745 Psion; Catspaw. 2-in-1 Vol. Comb. pub. ed. $30.90
Club ed. $7.98

0752 Elric of Melnibone; The Sailor on the Seas of Fate; The Weird of the White Wolf.
Spec. ed.▲
Club ed. $6.98

1172 The Vanishing Tower; The Bane of the Black Sword; Stormbringer.
Spec. ed.▲
Club ed. $7.98

5520 The Sleeping Dragon; The Sword and the Chain; The Silver Crown.
Spec. ed.▲
Club ed. $8.98

How the Club works: You'll receive your 5 books for only $1 (plus shipping & handling) after your application for membership is accepted. We reserve the right to reject any application. However, once accepted as a member, you may examine the books in your home and, if not completely satisfied, return them within 10 days at Club expense. Your membership will be canceled and you'll owe nothing.

About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come,* describing 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically.

If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need buy only 4 books at regular low Club prices during the coming year. You may resign anytime thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits for as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections for the month is always only $4.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions—UP TO 65% OFF. The Club offers more than 400 books to choose from. Each volume printed on our special presses is produced on high-quality acid-free paper. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but do mail the coupon today!

▲ **Exclusive hardcover edition**

★ **Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some**

THE Science Fiction BOOK CLUB

Garden City, NY 11535

I want the best SF in or out of this world! Please accept my application for membership in the Science Fiction Book Club. Send me the 5 books I have numbered in the boxes below and bill me just $1 (plus shipping and handling). I agree to the Club Plan as described in this ad. I will take 4 more books at regular low Club prices during the coming year and may resign anytime thereafter. The Club offers serious works for mature readers.

DS476

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.

NOTE: Some books count as two choices; if you pick any of these, please put 9999 in the next box.

Mr.
Ms. _____

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

If under 18, parent must sign. _____

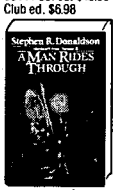
The Science Fiction Book Club offers its own complete hardbound editions sometimes altered in size to fit special presses and save you even more. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members will be serviced from Canada. Offer slightly different in Canada.

38-SF22

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

5314 Pub. ed. $18.95
Club ed. $6.98

5355 Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $4.98



4002 Pub. ed. $19.95
Club ed. $6.98

5413 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.98

3962 Pub. ed. $19.95
Club ed. $9.98

4382 Pub. ed. $17.95
Club ed. $8.98

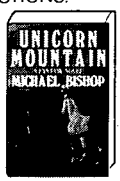
SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

7211 Pub. ed. $18.95
Club ed. $9.98

3517 Pub. ed. $16.95
Club ed. $5.98

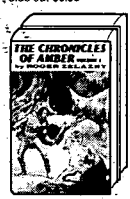
0737 Pub. ed. $16.95
Club ed. $7.98

4408 Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $4.98



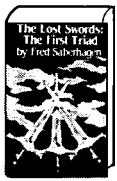
0570 Pub. ed. $18.95
Club ed. $7.98

5215 Spec. ed.
Club ed. $4.98



0075 The First 5 Novels. 2 vols.
Comb. pub. ed. $32.30
Club ed. $8.98

1420 Includes the First, Second and Third Books.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.98



7260 Includes Woundhealer's Story; Sightblinder's Story; Stonecutter's Story.
Comb. pub. ed. $45.85
Club ed. $7.98

★ 5322 Includes The Hall of the Mountain King; The Lady of Han-Gilen; A Fall of Princes.
Comb. pub. ed. $51.85
Club ed. $9.98

3871 The Silent Tower; The Silicon Mage.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $7.50

• ★ 5223/9999 Includes Roma Mater; Gallicenae; Dahut; The Dog and the Wolf. 2 Vols.
Spec. ed. ▲
Club ed. $14.98

Take any 5 books for $1

with membership

THE Science Fiction BOOK CLUB®

▲ Exclusive hardcover editio
• Counts as two Selection
★ Explicit scenes and/or language may b offensive to som

LICENSED FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED